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JUST SAY NO: AUTHORITY, DISOBEDIENCE, AND INDIVIDUATION

IN SOME OF SAM PECKINPAH'S MINOR FILMS

by

Ronald J. Felten, Jr.

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

### JUST SAY NO: AUTHORITY, DISOBEDIENCE, AND INDIVIDUATION IN SOME OF SAM PECKINPAH'S MINOR FILMS

by

Ronald J. Felten, Jr.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Tasha Oren

Sam Peckinpah is best known for his films *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), and quite a bit of the existing scholarly work on Peckinpah focuses on these two films; what's more, much of the work that does exist on his other films tends to be subjective and celebratory. The aim of this project is to critically and soberly examine Peckinpah's relatively minor works and from particular perspectives. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on one of the major thematic threads that runs through all of the director's films, both major and minor: how ordinary people individuate themselves through their opposition to power and capital. For Peckinpah, power takes many forms. God (and religion, generally) is an integral character in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), for example, and violent mobs, the police, and corrupt businessmen and politicians serve as antagonists in some of the other films examined here. Peckinpah's protagonists all battle these forces, to varying degrees of success, and in turn attempt to affirm their own identities through this rejection. In addition to the film scholars used in this project, Erich Fromm, Carl Jung, and David Harvey are a few of the thinkers employed in my analysis of these films, primarily Peckinpah's road movies and non-Westerns.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have never been completed without the guidance, patience, and general support of my advisor and committee chair, Tasha Oren. She gave me space but kept me honest. Likewise, I'm also indebted to the rest of my committee: Joe Austin, Peter Paik, Tami Williams, and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece. We are, in a way, our own Wild Bunch. Thank you for everything.

Thanks are due to Jim Ottery from the University of Illinois at Springfield, where I earned my M.A. in creative writing. Jim supported and believed in me during my time at UIS and encouraged me to apply to UWM's Modern Studies program. Without him, this journey would have never even started, and I wouldn't have met the incredible people I have since starting at UWM.

Speaking of those incredible people, I want to thank (in no particular order): Deedee Peterson for being one of the smartest, funniest, and bravest people I know and for taking me to see Neil Young & Crazy Horse; Susan Kerns, my "Modern Studies buddy," for making me feel welcome and for supporting me in more ways than she knows; Jill Logan for giving me the courage to finally start drafting Chapter 1; Drew Anastasia, Sarah Kessler, Terri Williams, Katherine Wilson, Meridith Kruse, Zoran Samardzija, and the rest of the revolving karaoke crew for helping me blow off steam and making me laugh more than I thought I could; Adam Ochonicky for commiserating with me over gin and tonics well into the early morning hours; Paul Gagliardi for (and I mean this sincerely) being like a brother to me and helping me in more ways than I deserved; Ali Sperling for being a better friend than I am and for realizing I needed

more fun than I was allowing myself to have; and Lee Abbott, Shawna Lipton, and Joel Seeger for being smart, supportive, and inspiring.

Thank you to the staff of The Comet Cafe in Milwaukee. I'll see you soon.

Thank you to the staff of Balzac Wine Bar in Milwaukee. My Sunday afternoons wouldn't have been the same without you.

Thank you to Laura Yell, Karly Sopcic, Marci Noonan, Erin Highland, Kate Dean, Kelsey Weaver, and Claire Kaleta from Milwaukee Power Yoga.

Thank you to everyone who supported my creative projects over the years.

Thank you to my writing group, 250 Words: Colleen Booker Halverson, Trent Hergenrader, Sarah Schuetze, Sarah Etlinger, Chris Drew, Kate Olson Nesheim, Nick Miller, Kelly Centrelli, and everyone else. I never would've finished this without your support.

Thank you to my students.

Finally, I'd like to thank my sister for just being herself. I'm so proud of you, Jess, and, even if you don't know it, you inspire me. And, maybe most important of all, thanks are due to my father, who has always believed in and supported me—from Little League baseball to today, he never let me quit and I hope I never let him down. I'd like to dedicate this project to him and my late paternal grandmother, Emiko (Margaret) Kubokawa, for being selfless, dedicated, and loving.

## Introduction

Sam Peckinpah is best remembered for his Westerns, and much of the existing criticism on his work focuses on these films in particular. Further, the scholarship that takes up these movies too often discusses them in an oddly celebratory manner. One of the primary aims of this project, then, is to take a more critical approach to Peckinpah's oeuvre. Specifically, my goal is to examine these films, and especially the relatively minor and not so frequently discussed ones, objectively and soberly. While Peckinpah was an innovative and often compelling filmmaker, he was far from perfect and his filmography is uneven, to say the least.

Again, I am most interested in those Peckinpah films that have not received a lot of attention. For that reason, you will not find much discussion here of *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*; instead, I will analyze movies like *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, *Straw Dogs*, *The Getaway*, and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, films that are not widely discussed or even particularly highly regarded. While it is true that many of Peckinpah's "minor" films are not quite masterpieces, they still have a lot to offer; at the very least, they help us recognize and understand some of Peckinpah's major thematic concerns, and chief among them is the relationship between power--in the forms of both money and authority--and the process of individuation for the "everyman."<sup>1</sup> Even more specifically, I'll argue here that Peckinpah's primary obsession was with how people come to define themselves through their rejection of the

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<sup>1</sup> As Jim Kitses writes in "Sam Peckinpah: The Savage Eye" from *Horizons West*: "Peckinpah is fond of describing the thematic continuity of his work in terms of a preoccupation with losers [...], misfits and drifters. Certainly, the work of few directors is so peopled with characters who are emotionally, spiritually, or physically crippled. However, more precisely, Peckinpah's characters suffer from not knowing who they are: above all, it is the quest for personal identity that provides the dramatic action of his films, a quest seen both in terms of a meaningful confrontation or dialogue with the past, and a tortured struggle to achieve mastery over self-annihilating and savage impulses" (141).



powerful and corrupt figures who seek to control them.<sup>2</sup> It is a sort of negative affirmation that can be traced back to, at least, Erich Fromm, Carl Jung, and Sigmund Freud, and I'll discuss their ideas vis-a-vis Peckinpah's work in considerable detail. Further, Peckinpah's ostensibly libertarian but ultimately humanistic philosophy will be considered with regard to the time period during which he produced his films; that is, how did the politics of his time affect his ideas about individual liberties vis-a-vis the dictates of the larger society and state, and how do Peckinpah's film differ from those of his peers?<sup>3</sup> In other words, I will explore the question of how his films are both products of and responses to his time, e.g. the Vietnam War, Watergate, political assassinations, road movies, and so on. Finally, I will also consider the representation and function of violence in Peckinpah's films. While I take issue with some of the director's claims regarding why he employed violence the way he did, particularly with regard to his invocation of Aristotle's theories about catharsis, I also think Peckinpah's use of violence was purposeful and ultimately effective in terms of serving his themes. The violence in his films is not, in other words, gratuitous, as some have charged.

Though I'm reluctant to use a cliché here, this project has been a labor of love for me and has its roots in my preliminary exam, which focused on the representations in film and literature

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<sup>2</sup> What most often troubles Peckinpah's protagonists is the stifling limitations and impositions of an increasingly capitalistic and industrial society. For this type of society to function, its members or participants must shed their instinctive drives, their primalism; they must willingly sacrifice, to some extent, their autonomy so this society can operate in an orderly manner. Property rights must be respected, for example, and we must more or less respect the ostensibly unfair distribution of wealth—bank owners and railroad executives, in Peckinpah's films, begin accumulating massive wealth while other, less privileged, less innovative, and less predatory citizens lead hand-to-mouth existences. Peckinpah's protagonists find themselves in between these two poles: they have a desire to accumulate capital for themselves but what is seemingly equally important to them is a certain kind of justice and freedom.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, writes: "[W]e do not believe in the idea of progress. Progress implies improvement, but man is always the same, confronting a situation that is forever changing, while choice always remains a choice in any situation" (47). He also writes: "Nowhere is it written that good exists" (28-9). In other words, all things are possible; what society deems "good" might change and no a priori values or truths exist.

of existentialism in the suburbs and shopping malls. Specifically, I was most interested in these spaces as somehow representative of a new Eden, full of promise and wonder.<sup>4</sup> After further consideration and research, I eventually decided to go back even further to examine this same idea in filmic depictions of the the American West. More specifically still, I decided to focus on the films of Sam Peckinpah, who as much as any other filmmaker, was consumed by the idea of escaping society's confines in order to begin again.

The first chapter here came about as a result of me reading Carl Jung's *Answer to Job* and, around the same time and as a total coincidence, watching Peckinpah's *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*. I found that the former text helped me to develop a unique insight into the latter text, and this methodology inspired me to go further. I remember a few years back hearing a graduate conference presentation during which the speaker championed the practice of pairing ostensibly unrelated or even random texts in an effort to develop new insights like this, and I've been a fan of this methodology ever since. That said, Jung's book and Peckinpah's film are obviously far from being unrelated, and some of the textual pairings in this project are even more deliberate; for example, I use Aristotle's *Poetics* in the second chapter on *Straw Dogs* because Peckinpah himself often cited this work as a major inspiration and influence, especially with regard to the concept of catharsis. Additionally, I use Erich Fromm's work throughout the project because his ideas on individuation seem, more so than any others, most germane with regard to Peckinpah's primary thematic concern: how one defines him- or herself through the rejection of and rebellion

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Marx, writing in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, suggests: "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination" (3). He continues: "The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent!" (3). If this doesn't describe the typical Peckinpah protagonist, I don't know what does.

against dominating political and business/capitalistic forces (Peckinpah saw power and capital as the primary corrupting forces and the things that most powerfully stood in the way to one's realization of a desire for happiness, freedom, and individuation). While these concepts apply to the third chapter on Peckinpah's road movies as well, I also bring in some specific scholarship on the genre there in an effort to better understand Peckinpah's place in it and the extent to which his rebellion against generic conventions either helped establish his contributions as remarkable or, somewhat ironically, what I dub conservative. Finally, the last chapter in this project focuses on Peckinpah's presentation of aestheticized violence; specifically, I analyze how he crafts and presents violence and why he depicts it in this way. In other words, who were his influences with regard to aestheticized violence, what purposes did his employment of this violence serve, and who are the Peckinpah heirs and proteges on this point? Much of this chapter focuses on the question of why screen violence is and is not attractive, and I consider the ways in which Peckinpah adhered to and violated the apparent rules regarding "attractive" screen violence in his last few films.

To be clear, my aim here is not to defend Peckinpah. Indeed, he made some mediocre films; however, there is no denying that many of his movies have a certain charm or appeal, even when they are sometimes uncomfortable to watch. That is another thing that interests me: aside from the films that were plagued by battles with producers and ultimately suffered from recuts, why would he make films that are, on a visceral level, more than occasionally hard to watch? Why aestheticize the rape scene in *Straw Dogs* the way he did, for example? How does this aestheticization serve a larger thematic purpose or argument? Those are some of the primary questions I set out to investigate and understand through the undertaking of this project. In

addition, my purpose is to also balance out some of the celebratory, subjective criticism that exists on Peckinpah. Though, of course, there are some outstanding Peckinpah scholars out there (e.g. Stephen Prince, Jim Kitses, Paul Seydor, etc.), but--and this is a question to which I still don't have an answer--they are the exceptions; it is difficult to understand why so much Peckinpah scholarship is unashamedly celebratory (e.g. Cordell Strug). So that was another goal: to approach and write about Peckinpah's films from the perspective of a relatively objective viewer, as someone who did not have passionate feelings about him one way or the other heading into this project.

There were several texts that proved to be invaluable to me throughout this journey. I'd like to discuss some of them briefly:

First, there's Carl Jung's *Answer to Job*. Jung's provocative analysis of The Bible's Job story is what first lit the spark, so to speak, beneath this project. While *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is, like many Westerns, clearly a celebration of self-reliance, it is also, as I explain in the first chapter, a sort of nihilistic lament; that is, the film seems to argue that while we will be tried and tested, whatever victories we earn will be temporary or even illusory. Time marches forward, that is, and it has no concern for the individual. Any god that might exist, Peckinpah argues, is equally indifferent. Jung's analysis of the Job story, while he was writing well before Peckinpah's film was produced, opens up this film to interpretive possibilities that are exciting and compelling, even if they are troubling.

The second book that I found myself coming back to again and again throughout my work on this project is *Sam Peckinpah: Interviews*, which was edited by Kevin J. Hayes. This text collects several interviews (including the infamous *Playboy* interview from 1972 with

William Murray) conducted with Peckinpah over the years and was invaluable in terms of helping me understand some of the director's motives, interests, and techniques, i.e. these interviews helped me see what Peckinpah was attempting to do in his films and this allowed me to understand the extent to which he was or was not "successful." While I recognize there are problems with auteur theory, I personally find it fascinating to hear in a filmmaker's own words why he or she did what (s)he did and how. That said, I use these interviews merely as springboards, places from which I begin further investigation and analysis; in other words, I do not uncritically accept Peckinpah's claims as truth.

Coupled with the interviews book, Aristotle's *On Poetics* was also a great resource. Peckinpah often cited Aristotle's theory of catharsis in justification of his use of aestheticized violence, and reading Aristotle's own words, along with the other drama theorists' I discuss in the second chapter, helped me evaluate the effectiveness of Peckinpah's use of violence in his films, particularly *Straw Dogs*. Ultimately, I think the filmmaker misunderstood Aristotle's argument, though that does not necessarily invalidate his films or the techniques he employed in their creation; instead, these movies are compelling despite the often misguided philosophy behind them.

Erich Fromm's *On Disobedience* was, like Jung's *Answer to Job*, a foundational text for me, and it led me to several of Fromm's other books that are incorporated here. Unlike most of my colleagues, I never quite outgrew my existentialism phase, and I've always been very interested in how both identity and meaning are formed or developed (to this day, I still enjoy reading Sartre). Fromm, in this text, argues that we come to be who we are by both asserting our beliefs and values and also, and just as important, by rejecting ideas, etc. to which we are

opposed--really, these are two sides of the same coin.<sup>5</sup> And, while this idea might not seem particularly novel to us today, it was still incredibly useful in terms of helping me identify Peckinpah's primary thematic concern: how people react when faced with an oppressive, existential threat that is also representative of money and power. Some of Peckinpah's protagonists "succeed" while others "fail" in their battles, but Fromm helped me to recognize just how pervasive this idea is in the director's work and, further, just how traditional Peckinpah's values are (in contrast with his contemporaries) with regard to the morals, goals, and fates of his protagonists.

Michael Bliss' collection *Peckinpah Today: New Essays on the Films of Sam Peckinpah* was also very useful but in a slightly different way. This text, comprised of recent scholarship on Peckinpah, gave me a sense of where things stand now with regard to our collective perspective on and feelings about the director. In other words, the essays in this book helped me understand what is being written about and how; further, it helped me make decisions about which films I should focus on, because they receive relatively little attention, and the tone my work should strike.

Similarly, Paul Seydor's excellent book, *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration*, was a huge inspiration. Seydor's prose is a pleasure to read and his analysis of Peckinpah's films greatly inspired my own; while I developed my own insights and arguments, Seydor helped show me how to do this.

My fourth chapter, which focuses on mediated and aestheticized violence, owes a great debt to a few texts. First, Christopher Sharrett's *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*

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<sup>5</sup> As Fromm writes, "'Original sin,' far from corrupting man, set him free; it was the beginning of history. Man had to leave the Garden of Eden in order to learn to rely on his own powers and to become fully human" (2).

provided some great context. While I did not end up directly using many sources from this collection, the essays contained therein were incredibly valuable in the way that Seydor's book was: I learned a lot by reading this text about how violence is used in film and for what purpose. I also benefitted greatly from one essay in this collection in particular: Tony Williams' "Woo's Most Dangerous Game: *Hard Target* and Neoconservative Violence." Many people would think immediately of Quentin Tarantino when asked to name a contemporary director who makes violent films, but William's essay convinced me that John Woo is probably Peckinpah's most direct descendant in terms of theme and style. Similarly, Guy Deboard's *Society of the Spectacle* and James Kendrick's *Film Violence* were indispensable with regard to helping me think about the aestheticization of violence in cinema.

Finally, Jeffrey H. Goldstein's collection *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* was critically important with regard to my attempts to understand exactly why viewers are intrigued by violent films. Even more, though, the essays in this volume shed light on the importance of aestheticization; that is, if screen violence is to be appealing, it must be crafted in such a way that it is, even if we only recognize this on an unconscious level, obviously "fake." Music, film speed, and editing or cutting create a sort of aesthetic distance that permits the viewer to process the violence without being revolted by it (though, admittedly, there is a fine line between being disturbed and being revolted by screen violence) and, at the same time, this aestheticization can make screen violence more effective in terms of facilitating the communication of ideas and themes. Specifically, J. Hoberman's "'A Test for the Individual Viewer': *Bonnie and Clyde*'s Violent Reception," Goldstein's introduction, and Clark

McCauley's "When Screen Violence Is Not Attractive" together formed the foundation for the fourth chapter of this project.

Ultimately, this dissertation's primary purpose is to add to the body of criticism that exists on Peckinpah's films. And, specifically, I aim here to celebrate less and analyze more; that is, I do not feel the need to defend Peckinpah or to argue on his behalf. On the contrary, I would be the first to argue that his body of work is uneven and flawed. Regardless, I think this project is successful in terms of developing new insights from fresh perspectives. What is most interesting to me, ultimately, is that while Peckinpah was incredibly conservative in many ways (e.g. he almost always celebrated the virtues of marriage and family life and opposed the dominating influence of capital vis-a-vis individual liberty), he was at times undeniably innovative when it came to technique; his use of slow-motion, multi-camera filming, cutting, and so on, while not entirely new, was developed to the point that Peckinpah's films stand on their own as products of a very particular time and representative of a specific viewpoint. His films are, unquestionably, responses to the violence of the late 1960s and '70s, for example, and they are effective critiques of state violence, political corruption, and arguably capitalism as an economic system. The aestheticized violence he employs in these films (especially those from the middle years of his career), far from being merely exploitative, serves these critiques in interesting and often innovative ways; further, it allowed him to represent and examine the complex relationship between power/capital and the individual's desire to live freely, outside of this authority's control and, in some cases, economic enslavement. Peckinpah's borderline libertarian answer to this problem was for individuals to a) remain true to their values while b) attacking, sometimes violently, the oppressive power structure in an effort to take back from that system and its



representatives as much capital as possible, using it to essentially buy one's freedom outside of the larger society. These ideas reveal just how indebted to the Western genre Peckinpah was; even when he was working outside of it, such as with his series of road movies, he still championed three of the Western's key elements: 1) Society is inherently oppressive and restrictive, 2) morals must be lived, and 3) violence, in moderation, is a necessary evil.

**Divine Darkness in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*: Sam Peckinpah's Jungian Response to the Book of Job**

**From Erich Fromm's "Disobedience as a Psychological  
and Moral Problem":**

"[H]uman history began with an act of disobedience, and it  
is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of  
obedience" (1).

**From Erich Fromm's "Let Man Prevail":**

"[M]an can stand on his feet only if, as Marx said, 'he owes  
his existence to himself, if he affirms his individuality as a  
total man in each of his relations to the world, seeing,  
hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, willing,  
loving—in short, if he affirms and expresses all organs of  
his individuality'" (59-60).

**Preface:**

While it is important to not overstate this, much of the existing scholarship on Sam Peckinpah's films is of a celebratory nature, which is to say that many critics focus largely on what, in their eyes, makes Peckinpah a great filmmaker. This type of approach certainly has value, but it is also necessarily limited. The purpose of this project, therefore, is twofold: first, to take a more critical, i.e. intentionally objective, look at Peckinpah's work (specifically with regard to his themes, arguments, and techniques) and, second, to examine some of his relatively

minor, lesser explored films. One cannot fully understand an artist without carefully considering each of his/her works, warts and all, and my goal here is not to uncritically celebrate Peckinpah, as he was an undoubtedly uneven filmmaker; rather, I want to attempt to understand not only his philosophical positions but to track their articulation in the films of his that haven't received as much attention as others (of course, one cannot undertake an endeavor of this nature without discussing more acclaimed films like *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, so I am not intentionally ignoring any of his works).

This first chapter in particular focuses on one of Peckinpah's most anachronistic films, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, which is part comedy, part Western, and part musical. Following 1969's *The Wild Bunch*, *Hogue* was an obvious departure in many ways; aside from the genre mashup, this film presents a tender and romantic -- if also sentimental and nostalgic -- vision, one at odds with many of Peckinpah's other works that express what some have described as a nihilistic philosophy. That said, this film also shares similarities with the other works in the director's oeuvre, namely an aggressive and passionate critique of authority and power (represented here by God) and its corrupt and abusive nature vis-a-vis the "common man" and, conversely, a celebration of individuality and disobedience. (Another common thread is Peckinpah's continued use of Bible stories to highlight injustice and critique both conventional Christianity and the pioneers' invocation of it to justify greed, theft, racism, murder, etc., i.e. Manifest Destiny.) While this theme was, to varying degrees, articulated in each of Peckinpah's works and in more than a few other Westerns, and its uneven articulation is really the central focus of this project, it is most explicit in *Hogue*, making this a logical jumping-off point for this project; here Peckinpah in some ways suggests that the corrupt bankers and politicians of his

other films are merely following God's example, or their self-serving interpretation of it.<sup>6</sup> (A note here, too, about the aforementioned genre-crossing this film does: Peckinpah's obsession with capital, power, and corruption seems to me to be so central to him as an artist that it, in part, explains why he worked in so many different genres, i.e. his desperation to articulate this critique motivated him to repackage it in as many ways as he could, and an examination of Peckinpah's exploration of various genres is another thread that runs through this project. The musical numbers in this film, for example, soften the critique's edge, perhaps making it more palatable for the average viewer, especially when compared to films like *The Wild Bunch* or *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*.)

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to Cable Hogue, the protagonist of this film, the supporting characters in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* serve to underscore Peckinpah's interest in scrutinizing questions of biblical moral justice. The Reverend Joshua Duncan Sloane (David Warner) is a nomadic womanizing preacher, for example, and serves as a foil to the simple, pragmatic Hogue. Hildy (Stella Stevens) is a prostitute who, as we have seen in other Westerns, is banished from town and becomes Hogue's love interest. As Michael Bliss notes in *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*, "Hildy most clearly recalls Mary Magdalene, the saintly whore" (128). Together, the characters of Hogue, Josh, and Hildy represent a personification of the attributes Jung assigns to God in *Answer to Job*: Hogue is vengeful but kind, Josh is conniving and sex-obsessed yet ultimately pious, and Hildy is materialistic but warm-hearted. Each of these characters, like Jung's God, is an antinomy and a paradox; however, unlike the God of the Job story, they are sympathetic and admirable; their fallibility and humility serve to present a kind of humanistic, pragmatic morality that is arguably more just in nature than God's. In other words, as in the story of Job, the God of Cable Hogue's world is at best merely a present yet mostly disinterested (except where matters of His respect and power are concerned) spectator and, at worst, He is a sadistic megalomaniac. In turn, His moral commandments are rendered irrelevant and Hogue must create his own moral code, one that has him acting as the benevolent lord of his own patch of the desert, Cable Springs. Here we have an inverse of the notion put forth in Genesis that man was created in God's image: in Cable Springs, God is created in man's image, as man creates his own god, which in turn requires man to create his own morality whereby men must be more good than not, despite—or perhaps because of—the lack of inherent cosmic order or justice. Further, like man, the god created here is imperfect. As Bernard F. Dukore writes in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, citing Job 1:21 ("The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away"), "*The Ballad of Cable Hogue* seems to emphasize the arbitrariness of God" (32).

## Introduction:

*The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970) is a significant Sam Peckinpah film relative to the director's body of work as a whole for several reasons, not least of which is that *Hogue* straddles several generic lines: sandwiched between two of Peckinpah's most memorable and controversial films, *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Straw Dogs* (1971), which have been called nihilistic and fascistic, *Hogue* is mostly subdued and sweet, ostensibly sharing more in common with the Jane Fonda vehicle *Cat Ballou* (dir. Elliot Silverstein, 1965) with its fast-motion slapstick comedy and cornball musical numbers than the carnage and ennui with which Peckinpah is commonly associated.

*Hogue* is also the film wherein Peckinpah most explicitly deals with what one might call "moral questions." The parallels between *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* and the Bible's Job story have been explored by many critics, but these comparisons tend to break down, specifically because scholars can't effectively explain Hogue's death (Hogue is played by Jason Robards) at the end of the film without either rationalizing Hogue's demise from a position of Christian apologetics or by abandoning the Biblical narrative -- and specifically the Job story -- altogether, i.e. contrary to Job's rewards for his loyalty, Hogue is run over and killed by an automobile just as he is about to run off with his prostitute girlfriend, Hildy (Stella Stevens). This motif of new technologies representing the end of an era is fairly common in Westerns, and particularly with Peckinpah, but it upsets attempts to read the character of Hogue as simply Job-in-the-West.

Carl Jung's book, *Answer to Job* (1952), however, serves as a lens through which we might view *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, and it allows for an interesting interpretation of both the Biblical story and, in turn, the film with which we're presently concerned: instead of serving as a

straight Job-like character, Hogue is arguably more similar to the the paradoxical God of the Old Testament or even the sacrificed Jesus; what's more, using Jung as inspiration, I contend that Hogue is revealed to be more moral and just than his supposed creator, who is depicted in both the Job story and Peckinpah's film as an antinomy (that is, good and evil, both prosecutor and judge) and not as wholly benevolent. At the very least, Peckinpah's film functions as a critique of God's behavior vis-a-vis Job and, interestingly, as a subtle critique of Job himself.

### **Overview of Job:**

The general plot of the Job story is well known: God tests Job's faith by allowing Satan to subject Job to incredible losses -- his livestock are stolen, his children are killed, and he's afflicted with agonizing sores -- as Satan argues that Job is only pious because God has protected him. Despite these trials and the advice of his wife, who in 2:9 demands that Job "Curse God and die," the hero remains faithful and is eventually rewarded by God, who "made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10). According to the story, Job was also blessed with 10 new children, who were more beautiful than his first, and finally died at the age of 140, "old and full of years" (Job 42:16-17).

These are just the basic plot points, but what's important here is that, generally, the story of Job is interpreted by many Christians in such a way as to suggest that God will reward those who remain faithful and obedient to Him in the face of adversity. Questions and various interpretations arise when one looks beyond these basics, of course, such as why God feels the need to prove Himself to Satan, for example, or why Job in particular is singled out. With regard to the latter question, philosopher René Girard discusses in his book *Job, the Victim of His*

*People* (1985/7), what he views as the glaring contradictions between Job's prologue and the rest of the text, namely that Job is presented in this prologue as "blameless and upright," as God-fearing and a shunner of evil, yet in his monologues later in the story Job dwells on the cause of his suffering, which Girard argues is not divine in origin but "merely human" (3). Citing Job's monologue in Chapter 19, Girard writes: "Job clearly articulates the cause of his suffering -- the fact that he is ostracized and persecuted by the people around him. He has done no harm, yet everyone turns away from him and is dead set against him. He is the scapegoat of his community" (4). Perhaps Satan saw Job as vulnerable for this reason and that's why he was selected as the subject for this divine experiment/bet. Regardless, Girard's point is that the prologue to this story is obviously at odds with details revealed in the story itself.

Others haven't been as obsessed with the ostensibly minor details of the Job narrative other than to employ them in support of one overall interpretive argument or another. Indeed, some critics and Christians don't make any attempt whatsoever to reconcile the apparent contradictions within the Job story, as Girard tries to do; on the contrary, they use the existence of these inconsistencies to argue favorably in support of God's irrationality, i.e. to suggest that God's logic isn't bound to or defined by human standards and so, of course, some of His words and deeds won't and can't make sense to us, as mere humans. George Steiner, writing in *Grammars of Creation*, for instance, argues:

Job's suffering is, on the level of theodicy, unanswerable. God, therefore, relies on something quite different from anything that can be exhaustively rendered in rational concepts, namely on the sheer absolute wondrousness that transcends thought, on the mystery presented in its pure, non-rational form. What

overwhelms [Job] is the “downright stupendousness, the wellnigh demonic and wholly incomprehensible character of the eternal creative power.” We are meant to be convinced “by the intrinsic value of the incomprehensible—a value inexpressively positive and ‘fascinating.’” (48-9)

Interpretations of this sort fuel the apologetics movement and, to be blunt, strike me as hokum, the kind of mental gymnastics required to explain and rationalize something that by the apologists’ own admission can be neither adequately explained nor rationalized.

My purpose here isn’t to present a case in favor of or against the Christian God, the legitimacy of the Bible, or anything of the sort; instead, the aforementioned interpretive responses to Job serve to illustrate that this story -- like any good art, really -- is ripe for dissection and analysis. The fact that Peckinpah’s critics tend mostly to rely on but one interpretive possibility -- and a rather lazy and uninteresting one at that -- when discussing the Job story vis-a-vis *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* leaves something to be desired. But how else might one interpret The Book of Job? Carl Jung’s controversial book, *Answer to Job*, supplies one answer to this question and is particularly useful in terms of giving us an opportunity to add something new to the existing and somewhat stale conversation on *Hogue*’s relationship to Job.

Before discussing Jung’s text, however, perhaps it would be best to further contextualize the argument I’ll attempt to make by first discussing Peckinpah’s film.

### **Overview of Peckinpah’s *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*:**

Set in the pre-industrialized American West, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is a relatively simple story. It will suffice for me to provide the basic plot points here:



1) Hogue is cheated by his friends, Taggart and Bowen, and abandoned in the desert without food or water. Like Job, Hogue presumably hasn't done anything to deserve such treatment; he and his friends have simply fallen on hard times and Hogue's friends, seeing him as the weakest link and too "yellow" to strike back at them, take the group's water supply and leave Hogue to fend for himself. Hogue swears revenge.

2) After days of wandering the desert and repeatedly begging God for mercy, Hogue rather accidentally, and just as he's resigning himself to death via starvation and dehydration, discovers what turns out to be a productive water spring. Hogue doesn't for a second entertain the idea that this could be divine intervention (though some critics argue it was); instead, he emphatically declares to God or to no one in particular, "Told ya I was gonna live. This is Cable Hogue talkin'. Hogue. Me."

3) Hogue soon learns that his new discovery sits along a stage coach route and that he could profit greatly if he were to develop the spring into a rest stop. While the project is in its infancy, Hogue shoots and kills a passer-by who drinks from the hole-in-the-ground without paying Hogue, though at this point Hogue has no legal right to the claim. In Hogue's defense, however, the "customer" drew his weapon first.

4) Soon after, a wandering preacher, Joshua, approaches the oasis. He says to Hogue, noticing the makeshift gravestone: "I see tragedy has already struck this cactus Eden." "No, that's no tragedy," Hogue replies. "Shot the son of a bitch. With his own rifle. He tried to kill me. He was my first customer. You're my second." Josh asks for some free water (i.e., mercy), but Hogue pulls his gun and won't offer charity even though it was through charity -- and disaster --

that he was able to develop his spring in the first place. Joshua offers to save Hogue's soul, but Hogue would rather have the money.

5) Through a series of events, such as the display of photos of naked female parishioners, we and Hogue learn that Joshua is a sex-crazed womanizer, though he certainly knows the Bible; his religion, though, is of a less conservative or traditional nature and is, shall we say, more pragmatic, i.e. Joshua sees himself as free to pick and choose the commandments to which he adheres.

6) Joshua convinces Hogue to go into the nearest town, Deaddog, and file an official claim for the property. Hogue has to haggle with bankers and real estate men but eventually takes care of business. The banker is initially reluctant to grant Hogue a loan for development, but when Hogue says he has a preacher (Joshua) who can vouch for him, the banker says, "That's the first man I'd doubt." Hogue laughs and replies, "Well, I'll be damned. Looks like I came to the right place after all." The banker and Hogue bond over their contempt for religion and agree to terms for the loan.

7) While in town, Hogue first sees and falls for Hildy, a prostitute. The two begin to make love, but a religious tent meeting outside of Hildy's window distracts Hogue. The preacher warns that "the devil seeks to destroy you with machines," foreshadowing the film's conclusion and Hogue's fate, and Hogue remembers that Joshua is back at the spring. Hogue, worried that Josh might sell him out, abruptly leaves Hildy (without paying for her services) and returns to his property.

8) Hogue and Joshua work together to build up Cable Springs. Hogue still has revenge on his mind, but Joshua warns Hogue: “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” Hogue replies, “Well that’s fair enough with me just as long as He don’t take too long and I can watch.”

9) Hildy, Hogue’s prostitute, is exiled from Deaddog because of her improprieties and flees to Cable Springs, where she and Hogue begin their relationship in earnest. Hildy asks Hogue if it bothers him that she’s a prostitute, but he reassures her: “What the hell are you? A human being. Try the best you can. We all got our own ways of living.”

10) Like Joshua, Hildy warns Hogue against seeking revenge on Taggart and Bowen, his former friends and current enemies. “It ain’t worth it, Hogue,” she says. “Revenge always turns sour. You ought to just forget them.”

11) Eventually, both Hildy and Joshua depart (separately) from Cable Springs. Hogue continues operating his business until one day when Taggart and Bowen just happen to arrive on a coach. They’re obviously surprised to see Hogue alive, let alone thriving, and Hogue graciously tells the men that he owes his success to them. The men leave, ostensibly on good terms, after learning that Hogue keeps his money at the springs because he doesn’t trust banks.

12) Taggart and Bowen later return, armed, in order to rob Hogue, who doesn’t appear to be around. The men search for his stash until Hogue reappears and, at gunpoint, forces them into a pit. After some shooting, Hogue dumps a number of rattlesnakes into the pit, prompting the men to crawl out and face Hogue. Hogue orders the men to strip down to their underwear and to walk out into the desert without food or water, effectively employing an eye-for-an-eye style of Old Testament justice. Taggart refuses and goes for his gun, but Hogue shoots and kills him. As Bowen begs for mercy, a car approaches and then continues on beyond Cable Springs. Hogue

realizes his business will soon be obsolete, as the car doesn't need to stop as the coaches did, but says, "That's gonna be the next fella's worry." Hogue orders Bowen to bury Taggart and, as that's happening, Hogue reminisces about Hildy. He decides to chase after and join her in San Francisco and, through an act of gracious forgiveness, declares that Bowen will now be in charge of the springs.

13) Another car approaches the springs, but this one stops and we soon see Hildy inside. As she and Hogue embrace, kiss, and decide to immediately go to New Orleans together, Hildy's driver gets Bowen to help put water into the car's radiator. Bowen learns that cars run on gasoline and, as a new business owner, gets the idea to start selling this fuel in addition to water. As Hogue begins loading his belongings into Hildy's car, he accidentally bumps and disengages the auto's brake. As the "horseless carriage" begins to roll down the incline toward Bowen, Hogue rushes to push Bowen out of the way but, in the process, falls and is run over. Hogue realizes he's badly hurt but curiously remains jovial.

14) Joshua also coincidentally returns to Cable Springs at this time and immediately understands that Hogue is dying. Hogue asks Joshua to deliver his eulogy now, before he actually dies. Joshua's words represent Hogue fairly, noting that men are "made out of bad as well as good, all of them." Significantly, Joshua also notes that Hogue was "in some ways" God's "dim reflection," adding in his address directly to God, "right or wrong, I feel he is worth consideration."

### **Overview of Jung's *Answer to Job*:**

As I stated in my introduction, the existing criticism on Peckinpah's film tends to suffer in two ways: 1) it rationalizes Hogue's death in a manner that is seemingly inspired by Christian apologetics, i.e. these critics argue that Hogue deserved his fate because he was ungrateful, or 2) it abandons the Job narrative in order to explain Hogue's death, looking at the film as a sort of Frankenstein, comprised of different Biblical stories and characters, i.e. some critics argue that Hogue represents in the latter part of the film a sort of sacrificial Jesus character. Now, of course, even the skeptical Carl Jung interprets God's decision to send Jesus to earth as a response to God's recognition of His own shortcomings as they were revealed in the Job story, so the Job and Jesus narratives aren't necessarily as distinct as they might appear and, in turn, my criticism of the existing scholarship surrounding *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* isn't as focused on this point as it is on the former; that is, I'd like to discuss Peckinpah's film and those critics who defended God's actions in it through a discussion of Jung's book, *Answer to Job*.

As Joshua says in his eulogy at the end of the film, Hogue was neither a wholly good nor wholly bad man. Yet even this ostensibly fair statement is a bit harsh: though Hogue could be a tad greedy and was at times somewhat insensitive, he was undeniably likable and was absolutely more good than bad. Further, even though he did kill a few men, these murders were all in self-defense, after his victims drew their weapons first. His death, too, as I've explained, comes as he's saving Bowen's life, a man who earlier in the film had left Hogue to die in the desert without food or water. The protagonist's death is tragic precisely because it's irrational and it raises the obvious question of why Hogue, as a character, had to die. In other words, what function did his death serve with regard to the narrative?

In Steven Lloyd's recently published article, "The Ballad of Divine Retribution," he argues that Hogue deserved his fate for two reasons: 1) "because Cable never thought to be properly grateful to his deliverer (confusing a miracle [the discovery of the spring] with his personal self-reliance)" and 2) "insisted on usurping the justice that his faith should have left to the Lord," with regard to Hogue's quest for revenge on Taggart and Bowen (64). While Lloyd acknowledges that *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is "an inversion of Job," he still sees the God character in the film as benevolent (48). However, this reading strikes me as obviously flawed. Each of the characters in Peckinpah's film sees Hogue as a decent man -- not without his flaws, sure, but generally good and certainly not deserving of divine punishment or, as Lloyd says, retribution. Yet if, as Lloyd argues, Hogue's God is benevolent, how do we rationalize Hogue's death, especially as it occurs at a moment of forgiveness, selflessness, and sacrifice? In other words, did he deserve his fate and was his punishment just? To the rational mind, Hogue's death can only be understood as an accident: it's Hogue, after all, who -- albeit accidentally -- dislodged the car's parking brake. Paul Seydor's suggestion that Peckinpah's employment of an "aesthetics of deliberate artifice" invites viewers to think of the film as an explicit statement rather than a work of realism further inspires my thinking regarding Hogue's fate and leads me to wonder if what Joshua meant in his eulogy was that God was simply wrong to punish Hogue, that His action was unjust (252).

To return for a moment to Joshua's eulogy, the preacher says to God: "In some ways [Cable Hogue] was your dim reflection, Lord; and right or wrong, I feel he is worth consideration." Does Joshua mean that he, the speaker, might be "right or wrong" with regard to his judgment of Hogue or does he mean that Hogue, who as we've established, "wasn't really a

good man, [but] [...] wasn't a bad man," as a dim reflection of God, deserves God's understanding and acceptance? In other words, Joshua might be suggesting that like Hogue, God makes mistakes and is both good and evil, and that one of these mistakes was claiming Hogue's life in an unjust manner.

Carl Jung is, to put it mildly, not kind in his analysis (in *Answer to Job*) of the God from the Job story. Like Joshua, Jung sees God's behavior as questionable at best. And, like Joshua, Jung sees God, particularly as He appears in the Job story, as an antinomy or as a "divine darkness." He writes:

[God] himself admitted that he was eaten up with rage and jealousy and that this knowledge was painful to him. Insight existed along with obtuseness, loving-kindness along with cruelty, creative power along with destructiveness. Everything was there, and none of these qualities was an obstacle to the other. Such a condition is only conceivable either when no reflecting consciousness is present at all, or when the capacity for reflection is very feeble and a more or less adventitious phenomenon. A condition of this sort can only be described as amoral. (3)

Jung also writes with regard to the Job story:

[Job] cannot deny that he is up against a God who does not care a rap for any moral opinion and does not recognize any form of ethics as binding. This is perhaps the greatest thing about Job, that, faced with this difficulty, he does not doubt the unity of God. He clearly sees that God is at odds with himself -- so

totally at odds that he, Job, is quite certain of finding in God a helper and an ‘advocate’ against God. (7)

What Jung’s assessment allows us to do is read *The Ballad of Cable of Hogue* as either a critique of the apologist’s defense of God, i.e. God’s actions against Hogue were unjust and reveal God to be imperfect, and/or as a critique of the Job character, i.e. *Hogue* allows us to imagine how Job’s story might have played out had Job not been so rigidly and uncritically devout. Hogue’s greatest sin, after all, is (as Lloyd says) not being “properly grateful.” Would a just God require this minor sinner’s death in order to appease Himself? If so, Hogue would realize as did Job, according to Jung, that “Yahweh is not human but, in certain respects, less than human” (21).

This question of God requiring sacrifices in order to appease Himself also and obviously recalls Jesus’ crucifixion. As Jung writes, “Yahweh’s intention to become man, which resulted from his collision with Job, is fulfilled in Christ’s life and suffering [Jung sees Christ as the personalities of Job and Yahweh combined into one]” (47). But this suffering and Jesus’ ultimate death are also somewhat paradoxical and seemingly unnecessary: why would God need to create and sacrifice a son when He, God, is the one being appeased? As Jung asks:

What kind of father is it who would rather his son were slaughtered than forgive his ill-advised creatures who have been corrupted by Satan? What is supposed to be demonstrated by this gruesome and archaic sacrifice of the son? God’s love, perhaps? Or his implacability? We know from chapter 22 of Genesis [Abraham and Isaac] and from Exodus 22:29 that Yahweh has a tendency to employ such means as the killing of the son and the first-born in order to test his people’s faith



or to assert his will, despite the fact that his omniscience and omnipotence have no need whatever of such savage procedures.” (56)

Jung’s analysis reveals the sacrifice of Christ -- and, we might argue, the death of Hogue, if we want to view him in the latter part of the film as a Christ-like character -- as totally unnecessary, assuming of course that God is a “loving Father.” And if Hogue isn’t meant to represent Christ, and if his death is interpreted as punishment for his lack of appreciativeness, we must view Peckinpah’s God as nothing but petty and wrathful. For how offended can an omniscient and omnipotent God be if His lowly creation forgets or even outrightly refuses to give Him thanks? As Jung notes, “The sheep can stir up mud in the wolf’s drinking water, but can do him no other harm. So also the creature can disappoint the creator, but it is scarcely credible that he can do him a painful wrong. This lies only in the power of the creator with respect to the powerless creature” (56).

Of course, the death/sacrifice of Christ might also be read as a kind of apology: God takes the form of man and, in turn, suffers a horrible death, one that He (due to His omniscience) had to see coming -- the crucifixion can be interpreted partly as a suicide, a sort of sadomasochistic self-punishment as a way for God to apologize to His creation for His behavior vis-a-vis Job and others. While this interpretation is debatable, it doesn’t make much sense with regard to Peckinpah’s film, as Joshua, a man of God, is left criticizing the Creator at the end of the film. Peckinpah’s limited crane shots, as Lloyd has noted, arguably represent God’s perspective; the final shot in the film is such a crane shot, depicting a desolate Cable Springs, with a lone coyote prowling the grounds, and strikes a rather lamenting tone, suggesting God, looking on, is remorseful over having punished Hogue. (This eye-of-God crane shot is an

effective way to communicate God's lament to the film's viewers, as it puts us in His shoes, so to speak, and also suggests to us that, like Hogue, we are all gods of a sort.) God's self-awareness, then, comes at the very end of the narrative, not earlier as it did in the Job-Jesus saga.

In my view, the most sensible explanation or interpretation of both the Job story and, in turn, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is inspired by Jung. In other words, Job assumes that he simply doesn't understand God's will; his mistake is that he doesn't seriously consider the possibility that God may not be wholly benevolent or even reasonable and/or that He doesn't always choose to refer to His omniscience. After all, God's "bet" with Satan in the Job story has less to do with Job than with God's own pride, and His insecurity allows Him to be manipulated by Satan. Throughout the majority of the story, God does nothing; Satan is the catalyst and author of the action. Job is rewarded for enduring, essentially, but his own superficiality, i.e. his satisfaction with material rewards, makes him appear as unsympathetic. Apologetics aside, I can't imagine an interpretation of this story that would convincingly argue that any of the characters are particularly noble. Conversely, Cable Hogue, while neither wholly good nor wholly bad, is certainly sympathetic, much more so than Job, and his fate is pretty clearly unjust (that is, if we are looking for a causal explanation). Perhaps Hogue realized what Job did not: that because God is not benevolent or perfectly rational -- as a Jungian antinomy, He can't be wholly any one thing -- Hogue must essentially forget God. Or, as Jung writes: "A more differentiated consciousness must, sooner or later, find it difficult to love, as a kind father, a God whom on account of his unpredictable fits of wrath, his unreliability, injustice, and cruelty, it has every reason to fear" (57). In turn, Hogue's morality, like Joshua's, is of a pragmatic nature, e.g. his sexual relationship with a prostitute and his justification for murder in cases of self-defense; he's never

cruel and is mostly “good,” which is more than Jung can say for the God of the Job story and the Old Testament generally. It’s Hogue, after all, who is capable of forgiveness (sparing Bowen and appointing him owner/manager of Cable Springs), not God, as is made clear through Hogue’s death. In short, though Hogue too is an antimony, he is generally more kind and just than his god.

### **Conclusion:**

Although *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is clearly inspired by the Job story -- Paul Seydor, writing in *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration*, has called the film “a rather free rendition” of it and notes that Job was Peckinpah’s father’s favorite book of the Bible -- virtually every piece of criticism on the film interprets God’s actions with regard to the film’s protagonist as benevolent or, at the very least, just (223). In “The Ballad of Divine Retribution,” for example, critic Steven Lloyd argues that God only strikes down Hogue when the latter disobeys particular commandments, chief among them is the order to not to seek revenge (Leviticus 19:18). Curiously calling *Hogue* both “an inversion of Job” and “one of the screen’s most determined conceptions ever of God’s generosity to humanity,” Lloyd apparently fails to consider that the God present in *Hogue*, like the God of the Job story, acts as an insecure tyrant (48, 50). In *Answer to Job*, Carl Jung suggests that the Job story in particular reveals God to be an antinomy: He is all things, good and evil, both prosecutor and judge. In the presence of such a paradoxical and temperamental deity, neither Job nor Hogue have any chance of experiencing true justice. Read from this perspective, Peckinpah’s *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* is open to an interpretive possibility not yet explored in the existing criticism on the film: neither God nor Job

are wholly sympathetic characters (or, at the very least, neither is “perfect”) and, likewise, Cable Hogue serves as an equally complex and morally conflicted surrogate for God, as Joshua suggests in his eulogy. It’s in Genesis 1:27 we are told: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” As Jung suggests, the “image” here can’t refer to human morphology, as “Yahweh himself had guarded against this error by expressly forbidding the making of images” (15). Rather, the similarities between God and man can be found in the aforementioned antinomy. Cable Hogue’s first name, for instance, serves as a pretty obvious portmanteau comprised of Cain and Abel, as Jim Kitses, writing in *Horizons West*, has noted (225). This suggests not only a dualism of spirit or nature but a moral paradox mirroring the God of the Job story. Hogue’s eventual demise, then, might be read as a critique of the amoral, unjust, and, perhaps most significant, *unsympathetic* God of the Book of Job and not, as some Peckinpah scholars have argued, as divine justice. What is more, the film raises a question to which Peckinpah returns in most of his films: “What will happen to man, and especially to his own followers, when the sheep have lost their shepherd” (Jung 69)? In other words, who will protect everyone from God (who, as I noted earlier, represents Peckinpah’s real target: powerful and corrupt men) once Hogue, as their shepherd, is killed? That is, who will save us once the powers-that-be eliminate our heroes? To underscore this question, Peckinpah shows us an ominously prowling coyote, arguably a symbol of God, on the screen after Hogue’s death. Who, he seems to be asking, will be next to stand up to the powerful and, in turn, perhaps be their next victim?

## **Aristotelian Alienation and Tragedy: The Dramatic Function of Aestheticized Rape and Violence in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs***

### **Preface:**

This chapter, like the others in this project, examines the relationship between what might be called power or authority and individuation in Peckinpah's relatively minor works. More specifically, this chapter, which features a discussion of *Straw Dogs*, explores the protagonists' reaction to a sort of brutal, savage power. This particular brand of authority is relatively unique in Peckinpah's oeuvre, as he usually represented "power" with figures of considerable capital and political sway (*Hogue* is also exceptional in that while it does feature representations of capitalism and industrialization, arguably the real power in that film is Hogue's god); here, though, Peckinpah gives us authority-as-threat in the form of physical strength and violent mobs. Somewhat ironically, the protagonists, who represent the monied, educated elite, are the ostensible victims in this film. *Straw Dogs* explores how the relatively civilized and cultured might respond when faced with a more base, existential threat, and in the end Peckinpah seemingly concludes that none of us is above violence, as much as we might like to define ourselves by our rejection of it.

This chapter also refers to Aristotelian ideas regarding drama and tragedy in an effort to make sense of some of Peckinpah's narrative strategies. Though Aristotle is an ancient figure, and of course many have theorized on the topic since (I do consider Northrop Frye and others in this chapter), his ideas are foundational and remain relevant and influential. I consult him also because Peckinpah seemed most familiar with this philosopher's ideas on the subject, and it

seems to me to make sense to refer to those ideas here as a means to evaluate the relative effectiveness of Peckinpah's dramatic choices. Further, many critics have cited Aristotle's concept of catharsis when analyzing Peckinpah, and Aristotle also seemed to find it appropriate to apply his own theories to works of art in various mediums, i.e. "representations." In other words, this chapter is in part an attempt to evaluate Peckinpah's film on his own terms, an attempt to discover what, for lack of a better phrase, he was up to; it is not, however, an act of apologetics or even a defense. Further, while Aristotle was not, of course, a film theorist, he was a drama theorist and was keenly interested in narrative and genre; Peckinpah, I contend, was first and foremost a dramatist who chose the medium of film -- and all of its tools -- in an effort to more effectively tell his stories. The editing techniques I discuss here, for example, are employed with the hopes of intensifying the drama and supporting the narrative. This is true of virtually every film and filmmaker, to be sure, but Peckinpah's obsession with a few thematic threads that run through each of his films suggests to me that a consideration of narrative and storytelling (and, in this case, tragedy and generic mode) is at least as important as a consideration of his technical choices and abilities.

The main purpose of this chapter is twofold: a) to examine the characters in *Straw Dogs* and their motivations and b) to consider how characterization contributes to the film's narrative and its themes (and those themes that permeated Peckinpah's work as a whole, namely the relationship between power and individuation). What's more, my essential purpose is an application of Aristotelian ideas regarding narrative and genre to this film, as it more so than perhaps any of Peckinpah's others contains rich, complex, and flawed characters. That said, it is important to remember that characters exist, as editing techniques are employed, to serve a

narrative or plot. As Malcolm Heath writes with regard to Aristotle: “Aristotle's arguments for the primacy of plot are therefore primarily arguments for the primacy of plot over character. He begins by claiming that 'tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life'” (xx). This film is, I argue, clearly a tragedy; further, the characters are not necessarily meant to be seen as representations of real figures. Instead, they are closer to abstractions, i.e. rough likenesses, personified ideas, that allow Peckinpah to convey his thoughts, as flawed as they might be, about reality and existence. The question he attempts to answer here is this: can we transcend our animal nature? His conclusion is clearly that we can't, yet I argue that *Straw Dogs*, despite arguments to the contrary, is not a nihilistic film; rather, its core theme is that we might be surprised by our ‘true’ selves and capabilities, revealed in moments of stress, whether we see those as good or bad.

### **Introduction:**

Sam Peckinpah's work tends to inspire passionately disparaging responses from many critics. *Straw Dogs* (1971) is, perhaps, the best example of this phenomenon. Pauline Kael famously dubbed the film “a fascist work of art,” for example, and argued that it depicts and mindlessly celebrates male “fantasies” of rape and violence. In “Peckinpah's Obsession” from *Deeper Into Movies*, Kael posited that the “goal of the movie is to demonstrate that David *enjoys* the killing, and achieves his manhood in that self-recognition” (396). Kael continued, “The movie takes not merely a non-pacifist position but a rabidly anti-pacifist position; it confirms the old militarists' view that pacifism is unmanly, is pussyfooting, is false to 'nature'” (397). Kael's conclusion is that the film “confirms their [men, in general] secret fears and prejudices that

women respect only brutes; it confirms the male insanity that there is no such thing as rape” (398). Roger Ebert, too, labeled *Straw Dogs* as “pseudo-serious” and claimed Peckinpah was merely trying to sell tickets by depicting graphic sex and savagery. But reviews like these necessarily depend on the reduction of the film's characters to caricatures, interpreting their actions as mere projections of Peckinpah's id; moreover, they ignore the critical function certain ostensibly objectionable scenes and the aestheticization of tragic events, e.g. Amy's rape and the film's climactic siege, play with regard to the larger narrative. In other words, some critics of *Straw Dogs* often reduce its characters to two-dimensional cartoons and do not seem to consider how these characters, even if they are representations of ideas, support a larger theme or argument: that what we are capable of can be surprising and deeply disturbing.

Peckinpah has his supporters, of course. Stephen Prince, writing in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, for example, defends the director's meditation on violence, noting that Peckinpah “seized the violence theme partly because it had already been placed on the national agenda [i.e. the war in Vietnam], and no doubt because it was a fashionable and sexy topic. But his exploration of this issue, I believe, was totally serious and generally nonexploitative even if he was at times a co-conspirator in the media's construction of him as 'Bloody Sam,' prophet of violence” (44). Michael Bliss, too, fundamentally disagrees with critics like Kael and Ebert. In *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*, Bliss argues that David's “victory” in the film is essentially ironic and is made possible only because of his tragic flaw: a lack of compassion. Bliss writes, “For all of his intelligence, [David] is too ignorant to realize that his insecurity, which is based on his failure to measure up to the traditional conception of the 'rough and tough' male, does not derive from a



fault in himself but from the rigid, conventional conception of what it means to be a man” (163). According to Bliss, then, *Straw Dogs* is an explicit attack on society's idea of “what it means to be a man” and certainly not a celebration of masculinity and machismo. While some in this group of supporters soberly respond to Peckinpah's work, others are as affected by their adoration as Kael (at least in terms of her response to this particular film) and Ebert seem to be by their disdain. In other words, “positive” analyses of *Straw Dogs*, while at times insightful, often fail to acknowledge the film's shortcomings and also overlook some of the reasons why the film works, for example, on a structural level.

In this chapter, I will argue that the film qualifies as a tragedy (in the classical sense), as opposed to being a mere exploitation film or failed drama, and has what Aristotle called in *Poetics* a “complex plot,” which the philosopher preferred over all other types. Plot, of course, depends on a connected series of events: a discussion of *Poetics* here—and a justification for its use when analyzing film—will reveal why the two scenes that have attracted the most negative attention, Amy's rape and the film's violent concluding siege, are necessary in order for the film to succeed, structurally speaking, as a tragedy (Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* will also be useful here). Further, I will expand on the thinking of several scholars who suggest that *Straw Dogs* is a film without a hero and that, in fact, the protagonist, David, is a villain, a reading that directly challenges most negative reviews of the film that claim David's violent awakening is intended to be celebrated. As I'll discuss, David is indeed a character of questionable morality and integrity, and whether one thinks we, as viewers, are meant to cheer his actions during the siege seems to inform his or her overall feeling about the film. The

interpretive possibilities here are numerous and provocative, and an Aristotelian analysis of the film's structure, individual scenes within it, and characters will create some clarity with regard to the presence, function, and arguable necessity of those scenes.

Even more specifically, I will examine both negative and generally favorable reviews of and scholarship on *Straw Dogs* in order to explore two related possibilities. First, that Kael and Ebert were essentially correct in their assessment that *Straw Dogs* is gratuitously brutal and that it fails in its attempt to tell a compelling story. However, I'll consider the possibility that its “failure” is due to reasons other than those they cite (namely, because Peckinpah does not include a sympathetic protagonist which, in turn, complicates a defense of the inclusion of the offending scenes). And, second, that champions of the film are right to celebrate *Straw Dogs* but for reasons beyond those they give, i.e. Peckinpah's decision to include such disturbing images and scenes was—again, in terms of Aristotle's notion of tragedy—necessary in order for viewers to empathize with, if not pity, such an unlikable lead character.

### **Plot Overview and Review of Existing Criticism:**

*Straw Dogs* is, without a doubt, a difficult film to watch. The infamous rape scene, in particular, has attracted much attention from detractors and defenders alike; however, the film's violent and bloody conclusion (the “siege”), which actually accounts for roughly one-quarter of the movie's total runtime, is plenty provocative, too. One's interpretation of these and other aspects of the film obviously informs his or her general response to or feeling about it, i.e. does Peckinpah mean to simply toy with and titillate viewers or is his desire to pose and explore questions that are necessarily uncomfortable through equally uncomfortable imagery? Is there

perhaps some overlap between these two possibilities? Indeed, many critics find it difficult when writing about his films to avoid talking about Peckinpah as a personality, often trying in effect to psychoanalyze him through his work: does *Straw Dogs*, for instance, reveal the man to be a nihilist, a misogynist, or perhaps even a humanitarian? This reaction is, in part, due to his outspoken and often outrageous nature, which came through in the many interviews he gave, but it is also the result of Peckinpah's decision to explore in his films such *personal* subject matter: isolation, failure, inadequacy, and anxiety, for example. Whether one enjoys his films or not, it is hard to resist their invitation—or, more strongly, their demand—to reconsider our own principles and beliefs; those who do resist, however, often do so at the expense of careful reflection, i.e. we can only resist by treating Peckinpah's characters as caricatures and by personally attacking the filmmaker. The provocative quality of Peckinpah's work raises yet another question, however, and it is one his aforementioned detractors often ask: who would make a film like *Straw Dogs* and why? Negative reviewers have attacked Peckinpah as a misogynist and a nihilist, for example, perhaps as a way to avoid thinking about and discussing the difficult and personal questions the work poses. But other critics, those willing to engage with the work, to consider it on its own terms, have developed some insightful (if imperfect) theories about *Straw Dogs* and what it might have to offer us in the way of ideas about the importance of vulnerability and honesty in our personal relationships.

Another issue to consider here is the fact that the film's plot is rather simple (though not, as I'll discuss later, in an Aristotelian sense) and this, I think, leads many critics and reviewers to respond reductively and to describe the film in rather shallow terms. These analyses necessarily fail to consider the movie's moral ambiguity and the difficult questions it raises and explores

(e.g. David's indecisiveness and anxiety or the fears and desires of individual characters, who are, as I suggested, too often interpreted as caricatures rather than three-dimensional beings with particular and complicated motivations). What follows in this section is a relatively brief summary and analysis of the film (certain aspects of it will be explored in more detail in other sections of this chapter) along with a review of some of the existing criticism on *Straw Dogs*.

## ACT ONE: THE ARRIVAL

The opening title sequence of *Straw Dogs* is filmed in black and white, and a rather ominous score accompanies these preliminary shots: we first see some headstones and then the image quickly moves out of focus. While still out of focus, there is a cut to a new image, which isn't at first clear; what appears to be a shot of some scurrying ants is soon, after a return to sharper focus, revealed to be a group of playing children. Simultaneously, color fades into the image, the credits conclude, and some ringing church bells match the melody of the score, which now fades out.

As the church bells continue to ring, we see the first of the film's main players: David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) is exiting a store with a box of groceries while one of the playing children, who is now carrying a dog, looks in his direction as if he's an oddity, quite obviously out of place. The shot returns to the children and a group of boys stop to stare; however, their collective gaze is directed at Amy (Susan George), David's wife, who is wearing a white sweater and, quite obviously, no bra. To emphasize this, the first shot of Amy that Peckinpah gives us is a closeup of her chest. The camera slowly drifts up to her smiling face and the next cut is to

Charlie Venner (Del Henney), who we will later learn is Amy's former boyfriend, as he emerges from a phone booth—Venner sees Amy yet she, apparently, doesn't notice him.

The camera is now above Amy, who is still walking along, and we see that two children trail her. They are carrying a massive steel trap. David (an American) approaches Amy (a Brit) from the opposite direction and asks her what the children are carrying. She says it is a gift specifically for him and calls it a “man trap” (we later learn that David is not comfortable committing to anything and requires pushing or “trapping” before he will act). Just as these words leave her lips, Venner enters the frame; before David can respond to Amy, Venner says, “They used to use it for catching poachers.” This is significant, as we will see, since the trap is one of the weapons David chooses to use during the siege, when he's fighting off Venner and his friends, who attempt to “poach” Amy. Venner reintroduces himself to Amy, saying he is surprised she remembers him, as David and the two children awkwardly put the trap into the couple's convertible sports car.

Much has been made by critics of the differences between Amy and David, and the physical dissimilarities are, of course, immediately apparent. He is conservatively dressed and appears rather stuffy or nerdy. Amy, on the other hand, is considerably more free in her appearance. As Michael Sragow writes in his essay “From *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* to *Straw Dogs*: The Narrative Brilliance of Sam Peckinpah,” in which he champions Peckinpah's film relative to the awful novel/source material, from *Peckinpah Today*:

Critics like Kael often charged that David and Amy as a couple made no sense: that Peckinpah had in effect staged a shotgun marriage to make his story work. But Amy's entrance into the film suggests one reason why this sensual, feisty

woman would have married a successful if constipated academic. As she marches through the narrow, winding street, breasts first, braless under a tight sweater, she's putting herself on parade, not merely as a sex object but also as a small-town girl made good. Her sexuality is part of her identity; she may flaunt it foolishly, but it's a mistake for critics to think she is going to give anything away. She is a woman of the world circa 1972, returning to a hamlet that hasn't changed much since 1672. (73)

Sragow continues, “This couple is made up of opposites in every way: he's far-sighted, but Amy needs reading glasses. [...] Peckinpah fixes our attention on each character's gaze. The film turns on how men and women see and misperceive each other” (73-4). The differences between David and Amy, then, serve a narrative function, as they create a necessary tension; as we will see, and as Sragow suggests, *Straw Dogs* is at least in part about a couple who cannot effectively communicate with or trust one another. The physical differences we notice immediately during these introductory shots mirror the psychological or emotional differences that will be revealed and explored later. Kael's characterization of Amy as a caricature (I will explore Kael's remarks in more detail later) suggest that Peckinpah was producing mere exploitation. Roger Ebert, too, in his review of the film from December 27, 1971, called *Straw Dogs* a “major disappointment in which Peckinpah's theories about violence seem to have regressed to a sort of 19th-Century mixture of Kipling and machismo.” Ebert continues, “The violence is the movie's reason for existing; it is the element that is being sold, and in today's movie market, it should sell well. But does Peckinpah pay his dues before the last 20 minutes [which serve as the film's violent climax]? Does he keep us feeling we can trust him? I don't think so.” Ebert also writes, “And

then the movie ends with the worst piece of pseudo-serious understatement since Peyton Place left the air. After Hoffman has killed them all, he drives the idiot back to the village [and utters the line about not knowing where he figuratively lives].” But as Michael Bliss argues in *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*:

*Straw Dogs* is far too structured and sophisticated to be anything other than a consciously created artifact rather than the result of prejudiced moviemaking. The film shows unsympathetic men abusing women and then links this activity with other forms of objectionable behavior; it should thus be clear where the director's sympathies lie. *Straw Dogs* is a dramatization of sexual bigotry, not an example of it. (142)

As I will explore later, so much criticism of Peckinpah becomes personal, e.g. he's a bigot or a fascist, because he attacks and destabilizes us as viewers; moreover, through his attempts to disorient us—in space and time via his editing techniques, for example—we can feel somehow psychologically violated, which is, of course, uncomfortable and, in turn, can provoke a defensive response. We can feel, as Ebert writes, like we cannot trust Peckinpah. (Interestingly, Ebert wrote in his review of Rod Lurie's 2011 remake of *Straw Dogs* that his feelings about the original “must have changed.” He says, “Perhaps I am more in touch with them now and recognize how close to home the movie strikes.”) Regardless, these early moments of the film in which Peckinpah establishes the tension between David and Amy, and when he introduces Venner as an outside threat to their union, set the stage for the drama—and, as I will argue, the tragedy—that will unfold.

As the film continues, Amy introduces Venner and David to one another and it is revealed that she and her husband are in England (and in her hometown, in particular, staying at Trencher's Farm, a family property) on a sort of holiday; David says he hopes to find some "peace and quiet" but Amy quickly and proudly corrects him, saying that David is working on a book, though she cannot quite explain what it is about. David condescendingly responds, "good try," and tells her to put the box of groceries into the car. Venner intercepts the box, as Amy shoots David a disappointed and irritated look, and insists on placing it in the trunk for her. As he does so, Amy suggests to David that maybe Venner can help do some work they need done on their garage. Apparently, the man (Scutt) currently employed to do the job is taking too long and, apparently and oddly without reservation, David agrees to employ Venner, who is Amy's ex.

Peckinpah next emphasizes David's otherness, with regard to both nationality and class, by showing us an encounter between him and patrons at a local pub, where he goes to purchase some cigarettes. One of the patrons looks David up and down (the camera assumes the patron's perspective here) and David's white tennis shoes and silk handkerchief set him in contrast to the blue collar, working class pub patrons and, generally, the drab and rustic surroundings. An exterior shot captures Henry Niles (David Warner) tossing an errant ball back to the playing children. We cut back to Amy, who is waiting for David to exit the pub, and Venner, who is keeping her company. Amy mentions to Venner that she thought Niles was "to be put away" and Venner replies by saying, in another bit of foreshadowing, "We can take care of our own here. Usually do." Venner then reaches into the car, puts his arm around the seated Amy, and asks, "Remember when I took care of you, Amy?" She first looks away, seemingly nervous, but then, turning to him, says, "But you didn't. Remember?" Venner is clearly feeling somewhat



emasculated by her rhetorical question and responds by somewhat threateningly placing his hand around her neck. He says, "There was once a time, Mrs. Sumner, when you were ready to beg me for it." Amy, aghast, says sternly, "Take your hands off me." At this moment, Peckinpah cuts to a shot of David, still inside the pub, peeking through the window, presumably seeing (but, significantly, not hearing) what has just transpired between Venner and Amy. As Sragow writes, "As this tumult comes to a head, David peers outside and watches Venner cozy up to Amy; he can't tell from the window of the pub that Amy is coldly rebuffing her old beau. But David must know that Amy is as alienated from their marriage as he is from this parish" (74).

David then witnesses a drunk local having his way with the bartender, only to be talked down and convinced to be on his way; as the man and his friends leave, David is trapped behind the opened door through which they exit, further underscoring his isolation and otherness.

David and Amy leave for Trencher's Farm in their sporty white convertible and, during the ride, David's insecurity manifests itself, as he asks Amy how well she knows Venner. Just as the question leaves his lips, Peckinpah shows Amy turning sharply and forcefully left at a crossroads, perhaps emphasizing that she, at that moment, has made a clear—and perhaps symbolic—choice, something David is incapable of throughout most of the film, a problem that propels much of the story's conflict (at one point, for example, Amy angrily blames David for leaving his American university, suggesting that it was because he could not take a side with regard to Vietnam War protests on campus: "You left because you didn't want to take a stand, commit").

This first sequence lasts under ten minutes but, in it, Peckinpah has set up the entire film: David is an insecure, paranoid, patronizing, American intellectual, who (somehow) has an

attractive, fun-loving (she prefers pop music while driving their speeding car whereas he insists on classical), young, British wife, who has a past he seems to know little about. The tension established here—especially with the man trap, which critic Michael Sragow calls “this film's equivalent of Chekhov's Gun,” and Venner in the mix—will build throughout the film, inspiring a climax in which the three principle characters we are introduced to here are rendered, in a sense, completely unrecognizable (73).

Amy and David return home and we see Scutt idly sitting atop a ladder against the garage. Amy and David kiss until David taps Amy's arm and motions toward Scutt, who is approaching their car. David is clearly embarrassed, but Amy just rolls her eyes and leaves. Scutt and another worker, Cawsey the rat catcher, carry David's man trap to the house's door. Cawsey ambiguously remarks that the trap is too large for David's prey but, again underscoring the function of the trap as the Chekhov's Gun of *Straw Dogs*, David casually says, “Don't count on it.” With Amy and David now inside the house, Peckinpah gives us a short yet significant scene between Scutt and Cawsey, who shows Scutt a pair of Amy's underwear he stole while the couple was in town. While this exchange is brief and somewhat crude, it too emphasizes the couple's vulnerability: they—but especially David—are outsiders here, so much so that they and their home, which might represent their union, are penetrated and violated at will, i.e. even their home and intimate possessions are not off limits to the locals. This exchange concludes with both men discussing their shared desire to have sex with Amy, saying they are not satisfied with Cawsey's “trophy” and, instead, want “what's in them.”

Back inside, Amy and David are looking for their missing cat. When David notes that the cat does not answer his call, Amy asks, “Do I?” David replies, presumably seriously, “You

better.” His machismo rings false, however, as there is nothing about his personality or appearance to suggest that he is able to control or possess Amy in the way that he wants her to believe. He immediately follows up his dictate by insecurely asking Amy why she hired Venner. As she enters another room, Amy casually reminds David that he is the one who hired the man. Outside, David says if the cat is in his study, he will kill it; immediately upon hearing this, Amy, who has entered the study, changes a plus sign in an equation on David's blackboard to a minus, arguably a literal and symbolic negation of David and his belief that reason and order are of paramount importance. This exchange, again, helps to establish a dynamic between the two that will become fundamentally important with regard to the action of the film: David's immature attempts to control Amy (and, here, her cat might be seen as an extension of her) and, generally, the condescending attitude he has toward everyone around him, sets off a sort of chain reaction. David threatens violence toward the cat and, thus, Amy messes with one of his equations. Her reaction in this scene is worth keeping in mind as the film progresses: it is clear that Amy does not want to be controlled, manipulated, or threatened; it is David's attempt to do these things, and his unwillingness or inability to relax (that is, to relinquish his chase for control), that creates the tension between him and Amy. It is his immature obsession with his own insecurity/masculinity, in other words, that makes him (and Amy) vulnerable, that essentially invites the trouble that is to come from Venner and the locals. He wants a kind of power and control—over Amy, over his physical space, etc.—that is unreasonable and this, as I will discuss later, is one of the forks in the interpretive road with regard to this film: I do not accept the argument that David, despite his physical “victory” during the siege, is a hero. Thomas Leitch, author of “Aristotle v. the Action Film,” suggests that David is “heroically reactive” (120). And Bernard Dukore, a Peckinpah

scholar, writes, “Becoming a man is what the exemplary hero of *Straw Dogs* does” (32). Both Leitch and Dukore are referring here to the violent David, the David at the film's conclusion who defends Niles from a lynch mob; however, I want to emphasize again how important it is to remember this scene in which David, who at best is half-joking, threatens to kill Amy's cat. He is not a particularly nice man now and that will not change; moreover, he is not a secure or courageous man now and that will not change either. The only substantive change we see in David between this scene and the end of the film is that he disregards his pacifism and becomes a killer. No matter the motivation, this hardly qualifies him as a “hero.” Indeed, as Paul Seydor notes in *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration*, Jay Cocks called *Straw Dogs* in his review for *Time* Peckinpah's first film without a hero (221). I will return to this argument in a later section where I discuss Aristotle's definition of the term and how it relates to types of plot and levels of tragedy.

The relationships and tensions introduced in the film's opening sequences—particularly David's hubris and his desire to control—are further explored in the remainder of the first act. David repeatedly calls Amy an “animal,” for example, particularly when she tries to engage him sexually, and he warns her several times to not “play games” with him. It is clear that David feels he ought to be in control yet his actions reveal his insecurity. This is emphasized further when Amy again vandalizes his chalkboard, this time brazenly, while he is in the room to see it. She is defiant and aggressive, but only after David commands her to clean the kitchen, fix the toilet, and to get her “friends” to finish work on the garage (his outburst follows her seemingly reasonable request that he spend more time with her). David's vulnerability is highlighted, too, by a brief scene in the pub during which Scutt shows off to Venner the pair of Amy's underwear

that Cawsey stole. This scene reminds us of the violation—and of the locals' nature—and, immediately following a scene in which two children watch through a bedroom window while Amy and David have sex, it supports the contrast between the cerebral, urbane David and the instinctual, libidinous townspeople, and it underscores David's general otherness, i.e. he is unlike those around him; however, and importantly, David's personal shortcomings reveal him to be different from but not necessarily above or better than the other characters in the film, as they prove themselves to be worthy if eventually unsuccessful adversaries.

Amy continues to defy David's orders: first, when he insists that she wear a bra so the laborers won't stare and, second, when she essentially allows the workers to watch her bathe by refusing to draw the bathroom curtains, as David demands. Amy's actions have been interpreted by some critics as childish in contrast to David's supposed sophistication. Pauline Kael, in her essay "Peckinpah's Obsession" from *Deeper Into Movies*, describes Amy thusly: "she's a sex kitten here—an unsatisfied little tart, a child-wife who wants to be played with" (395). But, as Michael Bliss notes in *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*, David, for all of his supposed self-knowledge, "is not only childish and impetuous but maladjusted. Unsure of himself intellectually as well as physically, David can feel secure only by degrading others. In this respect, he is as irrational and impulsive as those other characters in the film (Amy and the rowdies) whom he implicitly accuses of suffering from these faults" (147). Again, David is simultaneously distinct from yet, in many ways, similar to the locals and Amy: he is educated and is an American but he, too, is childish and selfish. If anything, his violent "victory" over the locals at the film's end serves to make him *more* like them, as he abandons his pacifism and becomes as lustful and primal as his attackers. The move toward sameness

disqualifies David from being a hero—at least from an Aristotelian perspective, as I will discuss later—and it also complicates some critics' assertions that he is meant to be interpreted as a realized man at the film's conclusion, since Peckinpah repeatedly portrays the locals as barbaric and childish, as when they almost kill David on the road into town and laugh about it (hardly like the dignified though still flawed “men” of *The Wild Bunch*, *Ride the High Country*, or *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*).

Meanwhile, Amy's cat goes missing once again. Later that evening, Reverend Hood (Colin Welland) and his wife stop by Trencher's Farm to invite David and Amy to a party at the church hall the following week. Hood says he hopes to see the two there, if they can spare the time. David responds by sarcastically jabbing that time is hard to find—a reference to Amy's continued requests that David spend more time with her—as are cats. David's insolence continues with a brief religious, historical, and philosophical debate of sorts with Hood. David's patronizing tone alienates his guests, who quickly but politely leave, and Amy is clearly disappointed by David's behavior. Upstairs later that night, however, she is willing to forgive him and she reassumes her playful, flirty demeanor. For once, David seems eager to oblige her sexually and, just as he goes to put his shirt in the closet, he finds Amy's cat hanging there, dead. He quickly shuts the door and is too disturbed to answer Amy's question about what he saw, leaving her to see for herself. Naturally horrified, Amy angrily suspects Scutt and Cawsey. David seems skeptical, apparently unwilling or unable to admit to himself and to Amy that the locals would do such a thing, until Amy spells it out for him: they hung the cat and in this specific place to “prove to you they can get in your bedroom.” If Amy's earlier antics, e.g. bathing with the curtains open, were a bit imprudent, she is now the one to recognize the serious nature of the

problem facing the new residents of Trencher's Farm. David's denial rightly offends Amy who, far from being the child Kael labels her as, is now marshaling her arrogant yet oblivious husband (he genuinely replies to her implication of Scutt and Cawsey with: "I don't believe that"). In fact, Amy suggests that they leave the farm altogether, which is something most critics overlook when painting her as an ignorant bombshell. It is Amy who presents the most reasonable option here: not only is the couple unhappy in terms of their relationship, but they are now being threatened; Amy would rather actively avoid the imminent conflict whereas David foolishly refuses to listen to reason, insisting on staying. Almost immediately, Amy turns. She recognizes she is trapped. David will not leave, so the only option now is confrontation, though David refuses to recognize this inevitability. Perhaps out of spite, Amy insists that David aggressively confront Scutt and Cawsey. Does she realize that David is like a lamb being sent to the slaughter? Does Amy want the laborers to assault David? Regardless, it is David's own doing and Amy will not let him escape the consequences of choosing to put them both in danger.

Another detail that is ignored by most critics is a small prop on the table David gets up from as he leaves to confront the workers in a later scene: two magnets, which had been avoiding each other, are drawn together just as we hear David greet the laborers outside. Opposite polarity in magnets is what attracts them, i.e. through difference they become one. The workers here represent one pole (i.e. barbarism) and David represents the other (i.e. pacifism and sophistication); the joining of the magnets on the table foreshadows the physical showdown during the climactic siege—or joining through conflict—between these two sides but, of course, as with the magnets, these ostensible differences or distinguishing characteristics disappear when the two sides or parts become joined: David will eventually destroy the other men but can only

do so when he adopts their barbarism and, essentially, becomes one of or indistinguishable from them. David, even if he might be viewed as noble earlier in the film—and I have attempted to demonstrate that he really cannot be—essentially becomes one with the local brutes, brought down to their level and, thus, cannot be seen as a higher being, in Aristotelian terms.

David lures Scutt, Venner, and Cawsey inside by asking them to bring in the man trap and has them hang it over the fireplace. As they are doing so, Amy, who thinks David is avoiding confrontation, brings in a tray of beer and, next to the beer, she has placed a bowl of milk that is presumably intended to force the issue of the dead cat. The men, including David, ignore Amy's gesture and, instead, the workers suspiciously invite David to go hunting with them the following day. He accepts and Amy, increasingly frustrated, storms out. David has failed horribly in his attempt to challenge the men and, what is more, has fallen into the workers' trap: while he is hunting with them the next day, he is abandoned and left in a field while Venner and Scutt return to Trencher's Farm to rape Amy.

## ACT TWO: THE RAPE

Venner, who arrives first, knocks on the door and Amy initially invites him in not because she is happy to see him; rather, she immediately says she would like to know what he thinks of cats. As Neil Fulwood describes this incident in *The Films of Sam Peckinpah*, “Admitting him [Venner], she confronts him about the cat. He reacts by forcing himself on her. She protests at first, but her resistance meets with a fist to the face and a flurry of slaps” (71). The message here is obvious: Amy is left to confront Venner, ultimately physically, about the executed pet because David either would not or could not do it. In other words, through his



weakness and poor judgment—first in his refusal to leave the farm, as Amy requested, and then in his inability to confront the workers—David is responsible for Amy's current predicament. Venner tells her that he fancies cats (a rather blatant and crude double entendre, one of many in the film) and proceeds to kiss Amy, who immediately asks him to leave. He refuses, forcing himself on her until Amy slaps him incredibly hard. Significantly, this slap is shown in slow motion. As Michael Sragow observes in “From *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* to *Straw Dogs*: The Narrative Brilliance of Sam Peckinpah,” “The [slow motion] device captures both the twisted passion of the man and the shock and agony of the woman. Amy shivers with fear and confusion. Venner was her hometown sweetheart; he probably still understands her in ways that David can't” (77). This arguably suggests that Amy is emotionally or psychologically “homeless,” unable to feel comfortable or secure with any of the people who *could* make her feel that way. After Amy's slap, Venner slaps her back, knocking her onto the couch (once again in slow motion). Terrified, she gets up and backs against a wall. Venner approaches her, slaps Amy multiple times, drags her across the room by her hair (an act David will repeat during the siege), and throws her onto the couch, where he, on top of her, kisses Amy again. Amy begs Venner to leave. He responds, with his hand raised, “I don't want to reave you, but I will.” He rips off her shirt and Amy repeatedly yells “no.” She cries and tries to refuse Venner's advances by turning away and crossing her arms over her chest, but it is clear that she does not have much of a choice here. Venner takes off his shirt and, as he does, Peckinpah quickly cuts together shots (i.e. flash cuts), from Amy's perspective, of Venner and David. As Fulwood writes, “Whether through conflicting emotions, numbed insensation or fear of another beating, Amy capitulates” (71). This scene, and the flash cuts in particular, has been interpreted in many ways: does Amy picture

David and feign enjoyment in order to survive the attack (i.e. perhaps if she imagines herself having sex with David, Venner's assault will be somehow more tolerable)? Is Amy wishing David were more “masculine” or aggressive, as Venner is in this scene? Or is Amy recognizing, perhaps for the first time, that Venner the rapist and her emotionally abusive husband are not that different from one another? That is, while we have no reason to suspect that he has ever forced himself on her physically, David certainly bullies and violates her psychologically and intellectually. Significantly, after David returns home from the failed hunting excursion and tries to make physical advances on Amy, Peckinpah again includes alternating flash cuts of David and Venner, suggesting that Amy does indeed conflate the two men, especially with regard to their mistreatment of her.

The rapid editing in this scene is noteworthy and provocative. In *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, Prince breaks down and details the twenty-seven shot series during the rape scene in which Venner and David are conflated through what Peckinpah called flash cuts, some of which last only three, four, six, and seven frames, which is less than one second. Prince writes, “Peckinpah and his editors had to know that a three-frame shot was much too brief to permit a viewer to clearly see the pictured image. It is, therefore, tempting to speculate that their edits here were intended to be subliminal” (80). Prince continues, “A viewer watching the scene cannot see these images, not in a way that permits recognition of their content” (80). And, finally, Prince explains how this sequence helps us, as an audience, understand that David is most certainly not presented as a hero, a point I will explore in greater detail later: “These shots are no longer just visualizing Amy's psychological perspective but are also working now on the viewer, subliminally extending Amy's perceptions of that

David-Charlie link to the viewer” (80). As Michael Bliss notes in *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*, “David indicates that he disclaims responsibility for the volatile situation developing at the farm—a situation that is, to a great extent, the result of the workmen's perceiving what a weak, presumptuous, and emotionally undemonstrative person David is” (148). It is during her rape at the hands of Venner that this becomes painfully obvious to Amy and the flash cuts communicate this realization to the viewer.

Reminiscent of Abel Gance's use of sometimes undetectably fast/short cuts during the famous cliff scene, for example, in his film *La Roue* (1923), Peckinpah's technique has the effect of removing Amy—and us, as viewers—from reality and, at least momentarily, creates or permits us access to a kind of surreal world of the unconscious. As Stephen Prince suggests, “Peckinpah used editing to probe the psychic consequences of this violence [Amy's rape] for its victim” (84). Even if we agree with Kael's questionable assertion in “Peckinpah's Obsession” that Amy “really want[s] the rough stuff” and that she is a “little beast” who is “asking to be made submissive,” Peckinpah clearly demonstrates throughout the remainder of the film the traumatic psychological consequences of this act, which he introduces through the rapid, schizophrenic editing of this particular scene, something Kael fails to address in her criticism (397).

Elsewhere, Stephen Prince notes in “The Aesthetic of Slow-Motion Violence in the Films of Sam Peckinpah” from *Screening Violence* that Peckinpah was obviously inspired by Kurosawa's innovative use of multi-camera filming, telephoto lenses, slow motion, and disjunctively angular cutting in scenes of violent death. Arthur Penn's use of montage in *Bonnie and Clyde*, which was released just two years before *The Wild Bunch*, also influenced Peckinpah.

In particular, Peckinpah was interested in using the combined techniques of slow motion and “a temporal non-synchrony of image and sound” to explore or express the disorientation and powerlessness—or, as Prince puts it, “a character's loss of physical volition”—people experience through violence (182, 185). Peckinpah uses these techniques in *Straw Dogs* during the rape, church social, and siege sequences; in each case, the anguish is prolonged and thus intensified, and we see human beings as the psychological beings they are. As Prince writes:

[S]low-motion images derive their poetic force from the metaphysical paradox of the body's continued animate reactions during a moment of diminished or extinguished consciousness. Slow motion intensifies this paradox by prolonging it. It is not just the moment of violent death which is extended, but the mysteries inherent in that twilit zone between consciousness and autonomic impulse, that awful moment when a personality ceases to inhabit a body that is still in motion. (185-6)

Sylvia Chong, writing in “From 'Blood Auteurism' to the Violence of Pornography: Sam Peckinpah and Oliver Stone” from *New Hollywood Violence*, takes this a step further. She notes, “In violence, the body becomes incontinent; it is merely a body of physical laws rather than a body of agency and will” (256). Peckinpah's use of editing in these scenes, perhaps especially during Amy's rape and her flashbacks to it, makes this transition—and the tragedy that accompanies it—explicitly clear and painful. Of course, critics disagree with regard to the appropriateness and effectiveness of these techniques and the message or purpose they ostensibly serve. Chong, criticizing Prince's defense of Peckinpah's aestheticized violence later in this same essay, writes of *The Wild Bunch* that the “sheer excess of bloody violence at [the film's] end

seems to obliterate any rational meditation on its cause or motivation” (260). One might say the same here about about the aestheticizing of Amy's rape.

Regardless of its appropriateness, this scene clearly not only implicates David but, of course, is critical of Venner, too. As Neil Fulwood writes in *The Films of Sam Peckinpah*:

There's no avoiding it—the rape scene *is* disturbing. But then, it should be—any film-maker who presents such subject matter palatably is being hugely irresponsible. Peckinpah shows the act in all its awful sickening ugliness. Far from exploiting women, the director actually delivers a resounding guilty verdict against the darkest and most primal urges that inform the male psyche. (74)

Even if one is inclined to agree with Kael's argument that Peckinpah's depiction of Amy, particularly in the rape scene, is an attack on all women, what Fulwood suggests is that *Straw Dogs* is at least equally an attack on men. Further, as Bernard F. Dukore writes in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*:

Amy's sexual actions and emotions [...] are the focus of some of the movie's hostile critics, who attack Peckinpah for them. Molly Haskell gratuitously calls him “an old geezer” (he was in his mid-forties when he made *Straw Dogs*) and stridently asserts, not analyzes: Amy “struts around like Daisy Mae before the brier-patch yokels, and then gets it once, twice, and again for the little tease she is. The provocative, sex-obsessed bitch is one of the great male-chauvinist (and apparently, territorialist) fantasies, along with the fantasy that she is constantly fantasizing rape.” If anything in the film suggests that Amy fantasizes rape, Haskell does not cite it and I have not seen it. [...] Apart from a tendency to infer

from the film more than it contains, including a deduction of what the director's ideas may be from the actual or presumed views of one or more characters, which is unsound criticism, these and similar revelations of Peckinpah's view of women are highly selective in the evidence they present, when they present any, and they ignore women in other films by Peckinpah. (33)

In this vein, Joshua Clover, in his essay “Home Like No Place” for the Criterion Collection, writes, “Yet to name the movie misogynistic is to mistake the degree to which it is a movie that despises everyone, its viewers no less than its characters.” Going a step further, Clover notes that like David, Peckinpah left America “to get his work done,” i.e. to shoot *Straw Dogs*. While it might be—and, well, probably is—a stretch to conflate Peckinpah with David, following Clover's logic, the film might arguably be seen as an attack on literally everyone, the whole of humanity, including the director himself in the same way that Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* was both a critique of Hearst and a kind of anticipatory and self-critical autobiography. Peckinpah, after all, did say in his famous *Playboy* interview, “When you're doing a picture, first of all, the period matters less than what the thing is about. You become all the characters. I've been every character in my pictures” (111).

While some critics have drawn generic and thematic comparisons between *Straw Dogs* and Peckinpah's Westerns, Neil Fulwood notes that “westerns boast characters who are decent, whose tribulations are undeserved [...]. This is not so in *Straw Dogs*. Everybody is guilty of something” (77). Again, the point here is that it is misguided to attack Peckinpah for his supposedly misogynistic depiction of Amy if one does not also emphasize the extent to which he shows each of his characters as tragically flawed, perhaps especially the men—and, among them,

David, the supposed “hero,” particularly. Kael is guilty of this when she argues in “Peckinpah's Obsession” that *Straw Dogs* is a “male fantasy about a mathematics professor's hot young wife (Susan George) who wants to be raped and gets sodomized, which is more than she bargained for, and the timid cuckold-mathematician (Dustin Hoffman), who turns into a man when he learns to fight like an animal” (394). She ignores the fact, for example, that David is responsible for what happens to Amy and that, instead of essentially avenging the rape, David and Amy are physically and emotionally separated at the film's conclusion. Fulwood continues: “And David is perhaps the most guilty of them all: for letting things reach such a stage. Another line from Nietzsche applies: 'He who fights with monsters might take care lest he become a monster himself. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you’” (78). Fulwood here counters the claim that David is portrayed as heroic during the film's conclusion when he has defended himself, Amy, and Niles, and Peckinpah goes to great lengths, as I have detailed thus far, to show him as remarkably flawed, broken in a way that can never be overcome; the best he can hope for is to beat the villagers at their own violent game but, in so doing, he must abandon the few qualities we do admire in him, namely his pacifism and humanistic moral principles. As I will explore later, David's fall—and, remember, his status and behavior were never as high or righteous as he thought they were—is necessary for this film to qualify as a tragedy (as opposed to irony, exploitation, or farce). In other words, his villainous behavior, and his culpability for what happens to Amy, reduces him to the level of the rapists, thugs, and murderers he opposes, and what makes this fall tragic is that he is responsible for all of the horror through his own actions and his failure to understand or come to terms with the nature of violence, i.e. through repression, he handicaps himself psychologically to the point where when

he is required to act (fight off the home invaders), and his behavior is relatively animalistic and instinctual, not reasoned or responsible. The first real victim of his flaws is Amy, particularly when she is brutally raped.

After the rape, David returns home from the hunting trip/ruse to find Amy alone in bed. It is a tense scene in which their shared victimization (though, obviously, to varying degrees) sets the tone: Amy is rightfully resentful that David in effect allowed her to get raped, mocking him for not hanging his coat in the closet where they earlier found her dead cat, while David is ashamed that he was tricked, left alone in the fields, though he is not fully aware here of the repercussions of his ignorance and foolishness since Amy does not explicitly tell him about her assault (she does, however, somewhat cryptically say in response to David telling her that the men “stuck it to me on the moor today” that they “also serve who sit at home and wait”). Amy refers to both herself and her husband as “cowards” and, when David goes to kiss Amy at the scene's conclusion, Peckinpah again employs flash cuts of David and Venner to underscore Amy's trauma and the instability of her emotional state, and also the similarities in terms of violence between the two men. The next day, David fires the workers—the only explanation he gives them is: “I don't want you around.” As he walks away from the men, Peckinpah shows David tripping over a rock and, as the workers leave, one of them trips over another rock. David here is again being conflated with the workers and, in turn, their violence. It is a similarity that Amy already recognizes, but Peckinpah will make this relationship even more explicit during the film's climax.



### ACT THREE: THE CHURCH SOCIAL

The next significant scene in the film takes place during a church social, the one Hood invited David and Amy to earlier. Amy is still (and understandably) emotionally distraught and distant during the party, and Peckinpah uses flash cuts here to draw attention to the juxtaposition between her anguish and the party's merry atmosphere: through these cuts, we see Amy recalling and reliving the rape when she sees her attackers drunkenly celebrating at the church. The obvious pain she experiences here strongly suggests that, despite what some critics argue, Amy did not “enjoy” the rape or, at the very least, that any type of pleasure she did experience was not worth the ultimate cost. The psychological effects of Amy's experience are devastating and they are compounded by the fact that David remains ignorant with regard to the cause of her distress; this further alienates him from Amy and Amy from him. What is more, David, as the result of his poor treatment of Amy earlier in the film, is responsible for this situation: not only is he responsible for Amy's rape, but he has also created an environment of mistrust, one in which Amy is either uncomfortable confiding in David or sees such a disclosure as pointless. If David could not confront the workers over the dead cat, for example, why would Amy think he could confront the men over this considerably more serious issue with much higher stakes?

Again, to underscore—or perhaps to exaggerate—this tension, Peckinpah employs flash cuts to create a hyper-dramatic flashback sequence during which Amy sees her jubilant attackers at present and during her rape. As Stephen Prince writes in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*:

The cutting throughout the film gives its scenes a nervous, edgy charge. Many compositions are de-centered, and the angular changes in camera position across

succeeding shots are often disorientingly oblique. Peckinpah's editing carved space up into fragments, and these fragmentary visual spaces correlate with the charged emotional tensions among the characters. Space in the film—psychic, physical, visual—is fraught with conflict, subject to attack from without, and requiring vigilant defense. (74)

In some ways, this scene in which Amy recalls and relives the rape is even more disturbing than the rape itself, as it eliminates any potential ambiguity with regard to Amy's feelings about Venner. David's presence at the church social and during Amy's flashback also creates tension: while he is physically close to her while Amy retreats into her own mind and memories, he is unwilling or unable to help her. When David does eventually notice Amy's discomfort, he does not ask what is wrong; instead, he simply asks if she wants to go home. Neither David nor Amy take the initiative to open a potentially productive dialogue; the result is compounding confusion, misunderstanding, and distrust. The sense of alienation and even hopelessness Peckinpah creates is considerable—both Amy and David are presented as so emotionally broken that we sense there is no hope of redemption or recovery. Indeed, even at the film's conclusion, when David is “victorious” after the siege, the differences and shared trauma between him and Amy remain irreconcilable.

While David and Amy continue to struggle through their dysfunctional relationship, Peckinpah sets up—or, rather, continues—another dramatic thread during this scene: Janice, a flirty young girl, has lured Henry Niles, the intellectually challenged pedophile, into a nearby barn where the two kiss and grope each other. Once the townspeople realize the two are missing from the party, a frantic search commences. Niles, hearing men calling for Janice, is afraid she

will be punished and possibly hurt. In an effort to protect her, Niles accidentally smothers or strangles her while trying to keep her quiet until the search party passes the barn. Terrified, Niles hides Janice's body beneath some hay and then runs away. Meanwhile, Amy and David, who have just left the party, are driving home through the dark and thick fog when they (David is driving now) hit Niles with their car. David feels a sense of great responsibility and insists on taking the injured Niles to Trencher's Farm until the police or a doctor can come attend to him. The townspeople quickly learn that Niles, who they wish to punish, is being held by Amy and David, and they descend on the farmhouse.

#### ACT FOUR: THE SIEGE

Rather than explain the film's climactic siege, which lasts for about 30 minutes, in considerable detail, I will instead analyze the most relevant points with regard to what I have already laid out, especially in terms of the tension between David and Amy and, equally important, what is to come in my discussion of Aristotle's ideas about tragedy as they inform *Straw Dogs*.

When the villagers descend on Trencher's Farm, they angrily demand that David release Niles to them. David, however, refuses, explaining to Amy that the men are sure to beat Niles to death (his obsession with order again manifests itself here in an apparent belief in law and justice). Amy unsuccessfully demands that they oblige the attackers, saying that she does not care what happens to Niles. Amy's pragmatism—she knows the men will not stop until they get what they want—collides with David's idealism: he does not care whether Niles is guilty of rape; he a) feels responsible for the man's well-being since David struck Niles with his car and b) is

outraged by the idea that the villagers can get what they want through violence, i.e. vigilante justice. But the lines are not clear here. As Michael Sragow notes in “From *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* to *Straw Dogs*: The Narrative Brilliance of Sam Peckinpah” from *Peckinpah Today*, “We may agree in principle that David should protect a terribly vulnerable man from a small mob. But Peckinpah fills the air with ironies. When David says, 'This is my house, this is me, this is who I am,' you can't help thinking, no, this is Amy's house (earlier in the film she had sneered, 'Every chair is my daddy's chair')” (79). Throughout the siege, moreover, David shifts and assumes a sort of middle position. While he is still outraged by the villagers' violence, he realizes the men, especially after they accidentally shoot and kill Major Scott, who arrives on the scene and attempts to protect David, Amy, and Niles, have no intention of letting the couple—or at least David—live. They have, as David notes, gone too far to turn back. The matter is no longer one of principle but is now an issue of survival: David is fighting for his life, yes, but also for his marriage, as Amy threatens and even attempts to leave him during the attack. Whether this is because she realizes her relationship with him and what he personally stands for are not worth her life or because she knows the villagers, particularly Venner, will spare her is not made clear.

Eventually, and through brutal means, David is able to kill all of the attackers. During a moment of sober reflection, he says: “Jesus, I killed them all.” There is an ambiguous expression on David's face here: it is unclear if he is proud of or disgusted by his actions. This and other scenes in the film are morally ambiguous, despite some critics' claims, as were Peckinpah's ideas about violence. In his famous *Playboy* interview, for example, he says:

True pacifism is manly. In fact, it's the finest form of manliness. But if a man comes up to you and cuts your hand off, you don't offer him the other one. Not if you want to go on playing the piano, you don't. I am not saying that violence is what makes a man a man. I'm saying that when violence comes you can't run from it. You have to recognize its true nature, in yourself as well as in others, and stand up to it. If you run, you're dead or you might as well be. (108)

And, in an attempt to address the charges of fascism and anti-intellectualism against him, most notably from Kael—who writes in “Peckinpah's Obsession” that “Hoffman, the victim of the villagers' (and the director's) contempt, is that stock figure of [...] the priggish, cowardly intellectual” and that “It's embarrassing that a man of Peckinpah's gifts should offer such stale anti-intellectualism” (395)—Peckinpah in the same interview says:

[A real man] doesn't have to prove anything. He's himself. My dad put it another way. When the time comes, he used to say, you stand up and you're counted. For the right thing: For something that matters. It's the ultimate test. You either compromise to the point where it destroys you or you stand up and say, 'Fuck off.' It's amazing how few people will do that. So if I'm a fascist because I believe that men are *not* created equal, then all right, I'm a fascist. But I detest the term and I detest the kind of reasoning that labels that point of view fascistic. I'm not an anti-intellectual, but I'm against the pseudo intellectuals who roll like dogs in their own verbal diarrhea and call it purpose and identity. An intellectual who embodies his intellect in action, that's a complete human being. But sitting back and quarterbacking from the stands is playing with yourself. (108)

But when is violence appropriate or necessary? This is not an easy question, of course, and it was further complicated at the time of this film's production by the ongoing Vietnam War, to which the film implicitly refers, and the consequent protests against it. As Stephen Prince states in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, Peckinpah “liked to observe that 'Things are always mixed,' and that 'There was no such thing as simple truth,' [and] did not have a single or simple attitude toward anything in his films. The electric tensions and uniquely provocative edge to his work are due to the impacted and contending moral and emotional perspectives entangled within the films” (7). Prince continues: “This is why Peckinpah cannot simply be dismissed with a convenient label, such as fascist or misogynist” (7). Further, Paul Seydor writes in *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration*: “Peckinpah has always been ambivalent about the so-called codes of the West, the masculine attitudes and gestures by which his heroes often define themselves, and the virtues of extreme and isolate individualism. It is not accurate to call him a critic of the cult of masculinity, because he is not a didactic artist” (221). If we grant the filmmaker the benefit of the doubt, as Prince and Seydor suggest he deserves, Peckinpah seems to be at least implicitly asking through *Straw Dogs* if and when violence is appropriate. In other words, where is the line? When must one fight? Is David truly a coward if he opposes the violence in Vietnam yet defends his home by the most brutal means? Is he a coward precisely because he resorts to violence in defense of his home? Does David even have a moral center, despite what he likes to believe about himself? In the same interview mentioned above, Peckinpah says: “I'm basically a storyteller. I'm not even sure anymore what I believe in. I once directed a Saroyan play in which one of the characters asked another if he would die for what he believed in. The guy answered, 'No, I might be wrong.' That's where I am”

(109). It is reasonably safe to say *Straw Dogs* is an exploration of ambiguity more than it is a pronouncement of a particular position. This is not to say, of course, that it is a nihilistic film; rather, it reflects existential confusion and the ongoing process of self-discovery and identity-development in both the context of war and everyday life.

In her essay “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies” from *Screening Violence*, Vivian C. Sobchack explains why *Straw Dogs* resonated so much with her:

What is the difference between my responses to [*Un Chien Andalou* and *Straw Dogs*]? Both play upon hidden fear in the audience. Both have moments of extreme violence. Why should I be able to watch one [*Straw Dogs*], but not the other? The answer lies, I think, in the qualitative nature of the violence involved. I don't have the pressing need to see a woman's eyeball slit by a razor; seeing it will do nothing but disturb me. And this particular violent action—although terrifying with or without its Freudian implications—seems to have little to do with my life as I live it every day. [...] Watching that scene, in other words, is not going to instruct me; it is not going to reveal to me something that is terrible, but which I need to know. The nature of the violence in *Straw Dogs* is different. It may not be treated surrealistically, but it is not totally realistic either. (115)

However, as Stephen Prince notes in “The Aesthetic of Slow-Motion Violence in the Films of Sam Peckinpah” from *Screening Violence*, the violence *is* treated or depicted surrealistically. Prince writes, “By breaking the established representational conventions [and by] using graphic imagery of bloodletting and the montage aesthetic, Peckinpah aimed to bring the era's violence inside the movie theater, which would no longer function as a place of refuge by shielding

viewers from horrific images” (176-7). And this is, in part, what makes the violence in *Straw Dogs* so disturbing. Sobchack continues, referencing both the domestic and potentially militaristic violence the film explores:

[*Straw Dogs*] involves the kind of violence that one fears now, today. Sickened, terrified, I *had* to watch the film. I had to learn and know what I fear and, however painful the experience was, for the moment I found a certain security in the fact that I had not backed away from instruction. In short, I was doing my homework—trying to learn how to survive. David in that movie was much like myself, the people around me. We all just wanted to mind our own business and yet found ourselves, our homes, our lives, threatened by people and things which plainly didn't make sense, weren't at all rational. (116)

Indeed, contrary to what some critics have suggested, *Straw Dogs* is most certainly not a revenge tale; instead, it is, while certainly imperfect, more of a query or meditation, and through its ambiguity avoids answers and prescriptions. The most obvious piece of evidence for this is that David, throughout the film, remains unaware of the fact that Amy was raped, i.e. as far as he knows, he has no motive for revenge. Instead, the film explores mob violence and how an idealistic and physically inferior person might hope to stand against such violence *when it is brought to him*, whether it is perpetrated by a drunken gang, as in the film, or a state's military. Further, as Bernard F. Dukore argues in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, one might think of *Straw Dogs* as a film primarily about commitment and existentialist responsibility. Dukore writes:



[David], who in a scene with the local minister appears to reject the view that religion gives life meaning or purpose, finds his own way, blazes his own trail, commits himself, chooses to act, and becomes responsible for his actions. I have quoted Camus as saying, 'This is called becoming a man.' Becoming a man is what the exemplary hero of *Straw Dogs* does. He achieves this status by defending a man who is incapable of defending himself, by killing people who would kill both of them as well as his wife, and by assessing his conduct as justifiable and honorable in these circumstances. (32-3)

While Dukore's analysis does speak helpfully to the ideas of ambiguity and responsibility mentioned above, it unfortunately fails in the way it depicts David's assessment of his own motives and actions. While David feels justified in defending Niles from the mob, he slowly loses his grasp on his own idealism or, at the very least, fails to recognize the consequences of his actions and, in turn, fails to recognize himself. This is demonstrated through both his ambiguous "Jesus, I've killed them all" line and his admission to Niles at the film's conclusion: when Niles tells David he is not sure how to find his way home, David admits that he does not either. David has lost himself. He has, he thinks, chosen and acted wrongly and consequently has become something other than his idealized self and has descended into existential chaos. In the aforementioned *Playboy* interview, Peckinpah says of David's line about being lost that Hoffman wanted to "say it with a smile, because the irony is too much for him to say it straight" (102). This (and the context for the line in the film itself) certainly does not suggest David enjoys his newfound "masculinity," as Kael suggests.

Moreover, while David is able to fend off the villagers during the siege and is by one standard “successful,” he and Amy remain, throughout and after the siege, separated, both emotionally and physically; again, there is no hope of reconciliation between them, and David leaves Amy alone (while he drives Niles home) in their blood-drenched house before the final credits roll. The fact that Amy had to shoot and kill the final intruder, who was attacking David, also challenges readings of the film that suggest David has “become a man” through his actions; indeed, he is even unable to articulate his appreciation to Amy after she saves his life, underscoring his shortcomings, and would not have been able to defend 'his house' without Amy's help. As a bit of further tragic irony, it is Venner and not David who saves Amy while she is attacked and nearly raped by Scutt during the siege.

In the final moments of the film, when David tells Niles he does not know his way home, David's admission anticipates another one of Peckinpah's tragic leading characters, Rolf Steiner (played by James Coburn in 1977's World War II drama *Cross of Iron*), who begins a romance with a nurse after suffering a concussion but decides to return to the front, knowing that his unit has little chance of “winning.” Steiner says to her, after making love, “I have no home.” All he knows is violence and, perhaps, survival. She counters, effectively, by saying that without the war—and he is not a particularly patriotic or nationalistic person—he would be lost, i.e. the suggestion is violence and maybe brotherhood is all he knows and these things thus define him. David, who despite his reluctance to take sides on virtually anything, e.g. the Vietnam War protests and confronting the laborers over Amy's murdered cat, believes he adheres to a kind of moral code. Indeed, perhaps ambivalence or a commitment to ambiguity is this code. Once he realizes he is capable of the kind of brutality that he would otherwise condemn, however, he is

lost. Violence has come to define him, just as it does Steiner. In other words, like Steiner, David, after experiencing chaos, has “no home,” which is the sentiment he communicates to Niles at the conclusion of *Straw Dogs*.

As Michael Sragow observes in “From *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* to *Straw Dogs*: The Narrative Brilliance of Sam Peckinpah,” Peckinpah's “greatest achievement was imbuing classical Hollywood narrative with a modernist sensibility. No Hollywood filmmaker suffused traditional storytelling with more ambivalence and gallows humor, defiance and despair. And his accomplishment was never more audacious or complete than it was in *Straw Dogs*” (69). As Sragow continues, “It doesn't just compel you to get to know its characters in action; it asks you to question every choice they make about matters of life and death and love and sex” (69). In “Peckinpah's Progress: From Blood and Killing in the Old West to Siege and Rape in Cornwall,” Dan Yergin writes, “Peckinpah's real theme, the source of his power, is how men become obsolete” (90). Put another way, David, who is depicted as impotent and ineffective throughout the film, comes to realize his own shortcomings—or the failures of his idealism—but only through ostensible “victory.” His philosophy, what he valued most and came to define him, is rendered obsolete, as he must violate his own code in order to preserve his own life. As Peckinpah said in his *Playboy* interview:

There's a point in the middle of the siege when David almost throws up, he's so sick, and he says [to Venner] 'Go ahead, pull the trigger.' He's sick of it, sick of himself, sick of the violence that he recognizes in himself. I can't believe anyone can miss this point in the movie. He's just used a poker to kill a man who's just

tried to kill him. He looks at what he's done with despair and absolute horror and he doesn't care at that moment whether he lives or dies. (102)

This annihilation of self is what makes David both a truly tragic and an arguably singular character in Peckinpah's body of work. As Neil Fulwood writes in *The Films of Sam Peckinpah*, “*Straw Dogs* is the first of the contemporary westerns; David Sumner is the first loner to appear in Peckinpah's work. There is no celebration [in *Straw Dogs*] of masculine codes of honour” (77). David, particularly at the end of the film, is utterly alone and alienated, even from himself; the real and ultimate tragedy here is that he feels dehumanized—and it is his fault, as he is responsible.

The moral ambiguity, especially with regard to violence, at work in *Straw Dogs* has inspired a tremendous range of critical responses. While many critics ridiculed the film, labeling it—and particularly its conclusion—a twisted celebration of machismo, others (e.g. Michael Sragow) have overcompensated by defending every aspect of the film. Stephen Prince's *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, however, finds a sort of sober middle ground. As Prince notes, [*Straw Dogs*] “demonstrates not the conversion of an egghead intellectual to a real man, as many critics have argued, but a nightmare vision of a pathologically repressed man finally losing control of his rage” (128). Prince's assessment of the film's purpose and function also strikes me as informative and serves as a nice introduction to the next section of this chapter in which I will begin analyzing *Straw Dogs* via Aristotle's *Poetics*:

Peckinpah's perspective here was oblique. Because David is such an emotionally warped and myopic individual, and is himself so out of touch with his own rage, he is an unreliable moral guide through the narrative. Although he is the

protagonist, he is not the exemplar of any affirmative principle that the film wishes to represent. [...] Because this is an unusual method for constructing an American film, many critics felt sure that David must be Peckinpah's mouthpiece. Accordingly, they took the film as if it were offering a conventional hero and interpreted the climax as a violent rite of passage through which David was reborn as a more masculine and potent character. (186)

### **Why Use Aristotle?:**

It might seem odd to analyze any film, perhaps especially one of Peckinpah's, through Aristotle's *Poetics*. For starters, as translator and professor of Greek language and literature Malcolm Heath notes, “There have been, and still are, fundamental disagreements about the meaning even of [Aristotle's] key concepts, like *hamartia* and *katharsis*” (viii). These disagreements, at least in part, are due to the almost aphoristic form of *Poetics*, i.e. ideas are introduced and claims are made, but there is nothing in this text resembling a thorough discussion. As a result, readers have been charged with putting together the pieces, so to speak, and filling in the many gaps. Disagreements about the key concepts Heath mentions have naturally arisen. These disagreements and even arguably misunderstandings have entered the realm of Peckinpah scholarship, too. For example, several critics have discussed Aristotle's theory of catharsis with regard to both *Straw Dogs* and *The Wild Bunch*, probably because Peckinpah freely cited this concept when defending the former film in an interview with William Murray from *Playboy*:

I'm a great believer in catharsis. Do you think people watch the Super Bowl because they think football is a beautiful sport? Bullshit! They're committing violence vicariously. Look, the old basis of catharsis was a purging of the emotions through pity and fear. People used to go and see the plays of Euripides and Sophocles and those other Greek cats. The players acted it out and the audience got in there and kind of lived it with them. What's more violent than the plays of William Shakespeare? And how about grand opera? What's bloodier than a romantic grand opera? Take a plot, any plot—brother kills brother to sleep with the wife, who then kills her father, and so on. Want to have some fun? Read *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. When you point things like this out to the New York cats, they tell you it was all art, which is crap. These plays and operas and stories were the popular entertainment of their day. (102-3)

Some critics accept Peckinpah's explanation while others do not. But understanding and responding to these critics' retorts is complicated, again, by the fact that the very concept of catharsis, for one, is difficult to nail down. Out of deference, I will use Heath's definition, which states that "tragedy aims to excite a response of pity and fear. Tragedy is 'an imitation ... of events that evoke fear and pity'" (xxi). Heath continues, noting that in *Poetics* Aristotle "refers at once to pity and fear: tragedy is an 'imitation not just of a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity'" (xxviii). The question poets are concerned with is, naturally, how to make this evocation as potent as possible. Aristotle, writes Heath, "identifies two things which make a sequence of events particularly effective: 'these effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another'" (xxix). And, finally: "Contrary to

expectation' introduces the notion of astonishment, while 'because of one another' provides an anchor to the discussion of necessary or probable connection that has gone before” (xxix). This is relevant with regard to our discussion of Peckinpah because I want to examine the function or purpose of violence in *Straw Dogs* with regard to catharsis, yes, but even more importantly as these concepts inform the film's characters and their motives and, consequently, our responses to them. In other words, how is the “sequence of events” functional in terms of Peckinpah's attempt to create a maximally effective tragedy? Such a question is often ignored in the existing work on *Straw Dogs*, as critics—especially those who claim to be offended or disappointed by the film—largely prefer to denounce Amy's rape and the siege as gratuitous or exploitative.

Stephen Prince, in his essay “Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects” from *Screening Violence*, writes:

The concept of catharsis derives from Aristotle's well-known discussion in the *Poetics* wherein he asserted that tragedy uses language and acting to evoke pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) in a manner that purges such feelings from the spectator. Aristotle's discussion is brief, and, rather than constituting a theory, it provides only the hint of an idea. He does not work out the body or the implications of his idea in any detail. [...] Significantly, Aristotle does *not* mention aggression, and, furthermore, he identified *language* and *acting* as the vehicles effecting the cathartic purge. He described a medium—classical tragedy—which conveyed its effects through language and in which horrific violence occurred offstage. (19-20)

Prince goes on to say, “Thus, [Aristotle's] remarks about catharsis do not necessarily generalize to a medium like cinema, whose design is so different than classical tragedy. [...] As I noted

previously, filmmakers use editing, camerawork, and sound to heighten the sensory qualities of violent episodes, and these are *shown* in film rather than described verbally, as in classical tragedy” (20). Depending on one's interpretation of the concept of catharsis, however, (s)he could argue that this intensification or heightening of sensory qualities permitted by film actually allows for greater catharsis, in some ways making the purge of pity and fear even more efficient or profound. Regardless, I am not as interested in defending Peckinpah's claims about his understanding and attempted use of catharsis as I am in a) examining the existing criticism that does this and b) thinking about how some of Aristotle's other ideas, especially those regarding the various types of plot, might be useful in responding to some of this existing criticism. Indeed, Peckinpah arguably misunderstood the relationship between catharsis and tragedy; as Heath writes, “[K]atharsis is not the function of tragedy, but a beneficial effect which tragedy has on some members of the audience” (xlii).

In his essay “Aristotle v. the Action Film,” which appears in *New Hollywood Violence*, Thomas Leitch argues:

American audiences are always ready to ignore their status as citizens of the most powerful nation on earth and identify with the underdog, and Hollywood has obliged with heroes [like the] mousy David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) in *Straw Dogs* (1972), goaded into a long-overdue but horrifyingly grisly response to the British roughnecks who have raped his wife and now plan to kill them. The initially peace-seeking but heroically reactive [hero of *Straw Dogs* is] motivated by revenge, a personal animus which naturally strengthens [his] heroic status and the audience's commitment to [him]. (120-1)



Leitch's use of the word "heroic" here is somewhat problematic, though, and his claim that audiences are meant to identify with David is one that has been challenged by other critics. As I detailed earlier, David is not a heroic figure and we see this most notably through Amy's conflation of him and Venner during her rape and at other times. Furthermore, as Aristotle explains in *Poetics* when discussing the best kinds of tragic plot, the most effective protagonist in a drama must be one "who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice" and who sees his fortune change from good to bad as the result of a "serious error" of some kind that is "not due to any moral defect or depravity" (21). But David's lack of hero status does not necessarily, though others have argued otherwise, make him a villain. On the one hand, David could be seen as failing to meet Aristotle's criteria on both of the aforementioned counts, as he *is* arguably "outstanding" with regard to justice (his defense of Niles, for example) but also *is* morally defective (e.g. his insecurity and pretentiousness and his mistreatment of Amy) and, thus, does not qualify, in Aristotelian terms, as an effective, sympathetic lead. Indeed, his "defects" actually allow tragic events to unfold: the murder of Amy's cat, Amy's rape, and finally the siege. However, contrary to what Leitch suggests, David is not motivated by revenge since, as I noted earlier, he is never even aware that Amy was raped. The complexities of David's character and actions, I think, defy simple reduction to caricature. As Heath writes, "Aristotle's point, then, is that a tragic plot is more likely to evoke fear and pity if a person inflicts harm on a *philos* [family member or friend], someone close to them" (xxxiii). Again, David is arguably responsible for the harm, notably the rape, that comes to Amy. But, as Heath also says:

When someone knowingly plans or inflicts injury on one of the people with whom he or she is most closely connected we feel disgust, and our sense of

revulsion interferes with the emotions of fear and pity. It is better, therefore, to have the character act in ignorance; there is then no sense of outrage to interfere with our sense of pity. Indeed, someone who unwittingly harms a person close to them is to be pitied; so in these situations we can pity the agent as well as the victim. (xxxiv)

The question of David's knowingness—or, whether he should have known or understood the potential consequences of his behavior—becomes central here. In other words, Peckinpah invokes and relies on pity, with regard to both Amy and arguably David; at the very least, even if we do not quite pity David (because we fault him for his unknowingness) we cannot reasonably claim, as Kael and others mistakenly do, that he is meant to be celebrated. Heath suggests that “tragedy aims to excite fear and pity; these emotions are responses to success and failure” (xxi). It follows, then, that David's failures in particular must be emphasized, both in the film and our discussion of it, as a way to guard against his glorification.

A tension emerging here that I will revisit later is between Aristotle's definition of a high tragedy and the various interpretations—especially with regard to the characters' motivations—of *Straw Dogs*, i.e. one might rightly criticize the film for failing to meet Aristotle's standard, but critiques that rely on reducing the characters to caricatures (which is different from looking at them as abstractions in service of an idea or theme), instead of looking at them as emotionally damaged beings who struggle and often fail in many ways, are ultimately unsatisfying. As Heath writes:

Tragedy, like all poetry, is an imitation. Specifically, it is an imitation of a certain kind of action. So one constituent part of tragedy is *plot*, the ordered sequence of

events which make up the action being imitated. An action is performed by agents, and agents necessarily have moral and intellectual characteristics, expressed in what they do and say. From this we can deduce that *character* and *reasoning* will also be constituent parts of tragedy. (xviii-xix)

Unfortunately, as I noted earlier, too much criticism on Peckinpah's film ignores the complexity of *character*. As Stephen Prince writes in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, "I don't know what movie these critics [Kael, Joan Mellen, Lawrence Shaffer, etc.] have seen, but their remarks demonstrate the tendency for discussions of *Straw Dogs* to opt for easy caricature and neglect the remarkable nuances of the film" (133). Further, as Paul Seydor notes in *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration*, "Peckinpah would write elaborate back-stories for the characters [in *Straw Dogs*]," though "[n]one of this material ever made it to the screen as such; but writing it, he felt, gave him and his actors a better understanding of the people and the story" (99). The main point here is that Peckinpah, while never one to shy away from spectacle, was principally interested in exploring the psychology of his characters (and in turn examining larger human concerns), and he did this by first fleshing them out, as Seydor says, and then by placing them into tense, dramatic situations. The characters' shortcomings, especially here in *Straw Dogs*, often exacerbate these situations and sometimes even lead to extreme violence.

However, Peckinpah's invocation of catharsis is not the primary issue here; instead, I am concerned with critics who appear to misread *Straw Dogs* and who use *Poetics* as their defense. Aside from the concept of catharsis, Aristotle provides several useful lenses through which we might view Peckinpah's film. I find his comments on narrative structure, in particular, to be the

most interesting and germane. To respond to critics like Prince, who see the use of Aristotle in a discussion about film to be inappropriate, though, I turn again to Heath, who notes in the introduction to his translation of *Poetics*:

This passage in chapter 4 of the *Poetics* is one of many in which Aristotle refers to painting and the visual arts in order to make a point about poetry. He regards these analogies as valid because he believes both painting and poetry to be forms of *mimêsis*, a word which I shall translate as 'imitation'. Many scholars would object to this rendering, and prefer 'representation.'" (xii-xiii)

As Heath says, Aristotle himself was to some extent concerned with art generally when discussing his theories. In other words, any form that served as a "representation" was, in terms of certain theories of his, analogous to the others. In this sense, then, Aristotle's ideas regarding narrative and tragedy are absolutely relevant when discussing film, though there are obvious differences between cinematic storytelling and that which is intended for the stage (however, these differences are not, contrary to what a critic like Prince argues, somehow obstructive). Indeed, Aristotle relies on such analogies in order to present and explain his ideas regarding *mimêsis*, for example, and to show how they relate to drama. Heath notes:

For example, an arbitrary symbol on a map may 'represent' an airport, but the representation is purely conventional; the symbol is not a *mimêsis* of the airport. A scaled outline of its runways would be a *mimêsis*. Aristotle is quite explicit in linking *mimêsis* and similarity even in cases where we would find it odd to speak of 'imitation'; he says, for example, that melody and rhythm can be 'likenesses'

and 'imitations' of character and emotion [...], effectively equating the two terms.

(xiii)

Aristotle's principle concern is what he calls imitation. As he writes in *Poetics*: “So imitation can be differentiated in these three respects, as we said at the outset: medium, object and mode” (5).

And on medium, specifically, he writes: “Some people use the medium of colour and shape to produce imitations of various objects by making visual images (some through art, some through practice); others do this by means of the voice” (3). Arguably, he suggests here that we can apply his ideas about catharsis, etc. to mediums other than the stage drama. Further, as he writes later in the text, “The poet is engaged in imitation, just like a painter or anyone else who produces visual images” (42).

At the risk of belaboring the point, I will invoke just one more example: Aristotle also speaks a bit about the evolution of modes and mediums. Tragedy, he writes, originally “developed from improvisations. [...] Then tragedy was gradually enhanced as people developed each new aspect of it that came to light. After undergoing many transformations tragedy came to rest, because it had attained its natural state” (8). He continues:

The number of actors was increased from one to two by Aeschylus, who also reduced the choral parts and made the spoken word play the leading role; the third actor and scene-painting were introduced by Sophocles. In addition, the magnitude increased from short plots; and in place of comic diction, as a consequence of a change from the satyric style, tragedy acquired dignity at a late stage, and the iambic verse-form was adopted instead of the trochaic tetrameter.

(8)

Of course, Aristotle could not have been aware in any meaningful way of the relative technical limitations of his time, i.e. he could not have anticipated the next stages of the aforementioned evolution (from stage drama/tragedy to cinema). What I am at least partly engaged in here is a thought experiment: how would Aristotle have applied his dramatic theories to film?

The discussion above, while brief, I think adequately defends the use of Aristotle's ideas, especially those presented in *Poetics*, to aid in an analysis of a film. Peckinpah's "imitation" of violence (and his obvious attempts to heighten or intensify this violence, most obviously by aestheticizing it), for example, can be discussed vis-a-vis *mimêsis* (and even, though perhaps less productively, catharsis) just as one can apply the concepts to a stage production. One final point here: Heath notes that "tragedy also includes *spectacle* [...]: it refers to everything that is visible on stage, and is not limited simply to striking effects" (xix). He continues, "Spectacle is a part of tragedy in the sense that tragedy (unlike epic) is potentially performable; so the poet has a duty to ensure that his text can be performed without visual absurdity" (xix). While there are, again, obvious differences between a stage production and Peckinpah's films, even his harshest critics cannot deny his use—some might say reliance on—spectacle. And, as Bernard F. Dukore suggests in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*:

The confined locale of the battle that concludes *Straw Dogs* is like the culmination of a stage play: besieged people trapped in a house. In Peckinpah's hands, cinematic directorial means enforce dramatic methods. He intensifies suspense by increasingly raising the stakes, by making each attack more threatening and dramatically consequential to the potential victims than the

previous assault, and by having each side employ greater violence at every successive stage. (97)

So, yes, of course there are differences between the forms—especially when it comes to camera angles, editing, and so on—but stage productions and films can be analogous in ways, e.g. characterization and narrative construction, and they can inform one another. Moreover, as Heath demonstrates, we can appropriately apply some of Aristotle's theories and terms to artistic modes outside of the theater: “Understanding why an insect or a worm has the form it does is a source of pleasure; this is analogous to the pleasure which can be derived from the study of a painting if one has an understanding of its *tekhnê*—that is, of the reasons why this was the right way to depict that subject” (xi-xii). Though Peckinpah's understanding of Aristotelian catharsis may have been crude, for example, his interpretation is not any more wrong or misguided than that of some of his critics; further, the major point here is that Peckinpah was clearly inspired by Aristotle's ideas and that alone might be justification enough to discuss those ideas here with regard to *Straw Dogs*. Additionally, a consideration of Aristotle's theories about types of character(s) and their relationship to tragedy (and narrative, generally) offer certain interpretive possibilities that have been heretofore unexplored.

### **Aristotle, Tragedy, Character (and Caricature), and Plot:**

The following passage from Heath's introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* is informative, especially with regard to the attacks against Peckinpah's depiction of Amy, who critics such as Kael see as “a little tart”:

Poetic plots do not deal in generalizations ('people usually get up in the morning'); they make statements about what a particular individual does at a particular time ('Bill got up this morning'). Indeed, the actions with which tragic plots are concerned are typically so exceptional that it would be absurd to talk of generalization. Orestes killed his mother; but it is not true that people generally kill their mothers, nor even that people like Orestes generally kill their mothers in such circumstances; such circumstances do not arise in general—that is one reason why Orestes' situation is such a potent basis for tragedy. (xxvii)

Again, this reveals the problem with Kael's claims, such as her reading, as it is presented in "Peckinpah's Obsession," of *Straw Dog's* most infamous episode: "The rape scene says that women really want the rough stuff, that deep down they're little beasts asking to be made submissive" (397). While Peckinpah claimed in his *Playboy* interview that Amy "asked for the rape" (something with which I don't agree) and that David "obviously married the wrong dame," the implication is clear: Amy does *not* represent all women; her strengths, weaknesses, fears, etc. are hers and hers alone, just as David does not represent all intellectuals, and Venner, Scutt, and the locals do not stand in for all people who live in rural England (104, 105). Their characteristics (e.g. attitudes and behaviors) seem more relevant to me than gender, though one can certainly argue that the two are not as distinct as I might seem to claim here. Regardless, as Heath writes in the introduction to his translation of *Poetics*: "[P]oetry is better if it has a structured plot [and] poetry is better if (to use terminology of chapter 3 [of Aristotle's *Poetics*]) its mode is dramatic rather than narrative. Poetry is imitation; it seeks to create likeness" (xvii). Of course, likeness is not the equivalent of sameness; we might identify with characters in a



drama—and to some extent they might even *resemble* us—but they are clearly not us. To further emphasize this distinction, Heath writes: “Aristotle's arguments for the primacy of plot are therefore primarily arguments for the primacy of plot over character. He begins by claiming that 'tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life'” (xx).

Perhaps this seems like an obvious point; however, it is one that is either ignored or attacked by those who are critical of the film. (And, again, I think there are plenty of reasonable criticisms one can make of *Straw Dogs*, but none that rely on this sort of totalizing reductionism are very effective.) As Heath notes above, a poetic plot is concerned with how individuals respond to events, and Peckinpah's film imagines how individuals, each with their own unique flaws, play off one another and react to events that are, to varying degrees, out of their control (and David, at least, is disturbed by how his response challenges his ideas regarding his own identity). As Aristotle writes in *Poetics*, the way an audience responds to a character's change in fortune is informed by whether the character experiences a “reversal” or a sense of “recognition.” As Heath explains, “A *complex* plot [which is the type Aristotle preferred] also satisfies the first two conditions [events are continuous and unified, and there is a change of fortune], but unlike the simple plot it does have reversal or recognition” (xxix-xxx). Heath goes on to explain that recognition is a change from ignorance to knowledge and that reversal involves a realistic or probable inversion of the expected outcome of some action. Here, for example, is an opportunity for an insightful critique: does David experience “recognition,” a change from ignorance to knowledge? The last scene of the film, in which David admits to Niles that he no longer knows his way “home,” might be viewed as an acknowledgment of his continued ignorance. Then again, his confession is made possible only by an awareness of his

ignorance, i.e. David is now aware of what he does not know and, removed from the insecurity he displayed earlier in the film, is finally able to admit this, that he had failed himself and Amy. The ambiguity seems clear to me, though critics have pounced on this scene, too, by arguing that David is somehow heroic here—that he has “become a man” through violence—and that the “evolution” of his character justifies the extreme violence he has just committed in order to realize this maturation.

In order to better understand how the existing criticism on *Straw Dogs* deals with David's metamorphosis, and to examine the strengths and weaknesses of this criticism, I would like to review a few illuminating passages from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. In this first bit of text, Frye echoes Aristotle: “If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the *low mimetic* mode” (34). I would argue that this might describe David, who at first appears to be superior—with regard to intelligence, for example—to the villagers but who is later intimidated and tricked by them. However, I am not entirely sure viewers are meant to recognize and respond to a “sense of common humanity” vis-a-vis David, as he remains inhumane throughout the film, first through his condescension toward Amy and then by the brutal, savage violence he commits during the siege. Frye continues: “If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic* mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation” (34). And here is where things can get tricky in terms of classification, as one could also argue that this description applies to David since,

despite his obvious intellect, he lacks a kind of common sense or street smarts, especially relative to the laborers (and Venner, in particular). We, as viewers, know David is flawed—perhaps especially with regard to how he treats his wife, Amy—even if he does not realize it, and this compounds the issue: not only is he flawed (e.g. emotionally unavailable, patronizing, and so on), but he is ignorant of these flaws. His ignorance and impotence isolate him from the others; his lack of knowledge about Amy's rape and his responsibility for it further set him apart and, in turn, intensifies both the narrative drama and increases the pity we feel for David, though he alone is responsible for his condition and situation.

As Frye continues with his definitions, however, the issue is further complicated:

In low mimetic tragedy, pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally, as sensations. In fact the word 'sensational' could have a more useful meaning in criticism if it were not merely an adverse value-judgement. The best word for low mimetic or domestic tragedy is, perhaps, pathos, and pathos has a close relation to the sensational reflex of tears. Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience. [...] We notice that while tragedy may massacre a whole cast, pathos is usually concentrated on a single character, partly because low mimetic society is more strongly individualized.

(38)

This description does seem apt with regard to David, but only if we believe that his flaws appeal to our sympathy, that they are understandable and to some extent reasonable. He is isolated, for example, being the only American character in the film; further, his wife is younger and more

attractive than him, and the villagers treat him with contempt. In this sense, the resentment toward Amy he displays might be misplaced but is somewhat understandable, though not excusable. If Peckinpah had given us scenes of the couple in America before leaving for England, we might have a better sense of David's natural state, his disposition when comfortable and unthreatened. On the other hand, David tells Amy that part of the reason he agreed to come to England was because she said she thought they would be happier there; this suggests that tensions between the two existed before David was ostensibly alienated and made a stranger, and I suspect David was responsible for these tensions at least as much as, if not more than, Amy and/or other factors.

Frye continues:

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by a social consensus. [...] The type of character involved here we may call by the Greek word *alazon*, which means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. The most popular types of *alazon* are the *miles gloriosus* and the learned crank or obsessed philosopher. (39)

The low mimetic mode, then, seems less and less fitting as Frye elaborates. While it is true that David seemingly attempts to fit in or “belong” to the villagers' “social group,” his efforts are at least slightly disingenuous. When he agrees to go hunting with the laborers, for example, before

the rape scene, his motive seems inspired by spite for his wife, who had just embarrassed him during the cat saucer incident. In fact, it would be more accurate to say David does not want to belong to any group. As we learn through his discussion with Amy about why they left the United States, he did not want to take a side with regard to the Vietnam War protests on campus. What's more, once in England, he gets upset any time he is asked or forced to leave his study. Frye's terms "the learned crank" and "obsessed philosopher" might seem apposite, but, from what we can tell, David is a legitimate and respected academic; he has been awarded a grant, for example, and though he struggles with the equation on his chalkboard, his obsession is professional, not abstract, i.e. he feels a sense of duty to finish his work.

So we are left with Frye's ironic mode, as David is in many ways presented as inferior, and the scene, or really the entire narrative of the film, we are looking down on is certainly one of literal and figurative bondage, frustration, and absurdity. As Frye writes later in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "Irony does not need an exceptional central figure: as a rule, the dingier the hero the sharper the irony, when irony alone is aimed at" (210). Given the narrative details of *Straw Dogs* and especially the film's climax and conclusion, this classification seems appropriate. If, then, *Straw Dogs* qualifies as a tragically ironic film—though it is difficult to ascertain whether this is what Peckinpah "aimed at," since he, most notably in the *Playboy* interview, arguably betrays the richness, depth, and complexity of his own film—what are the shortcomings of some of the existing criticism on it? And my principal concern here: in what ways might Aristotle be of help in terms of filling in some of these critical gaps in terms of classification, in particular (I, for one, am reluctant to categorize *Straw Dogs* as irony)? How might a look at *Poetics* help to make Peckinpah's use of aestheticized violence more intelligible?

As I stated earlier, I am not terribly interested in the supposed relationship between *Straw Dogs* and the concept of catharsis, though I would be remiss if I did not at least introduce some of the scholarship that has been done on this point. In “Human Striving, Human Strife: Sam Peckinpah and the Journey of the Soul” from *Peckinpah Today*, Cordell Strug writes:

One of the oldest ideas about the effect of tragic drama comes from Aristotle: the audience experiences catharsis, often understood as a purging of emotions. I've heard Peckinpah in interviews speak defensively of his work this way, as being shaped toward catharsis, intended to purge society of violence by its vivid portrayal. He can't have believed this, and the notion of purging never seemed to make much sense anyway, except as a defense against moralists. Martha Nussbaum, in a penetrating work on Greek thought, has argued that catharsis was not about purgation but about clarification: tragedy clarified life and its values.

(137)

Strug's take, as it is presented here, is as useful as it is refreshingly sober or cogent—and, most important, it speaks to my aversion of Peckinpah's invocation of catharsis as a defense. Strug's passage is also useful in providing a segue, via Nussbaum, to a more productive discussion of the *narrative* function of rape and violence in *Straw Dogs*. In other words, how do the rape and siege sequences operate on a psychological level as opposed to a visceral one, if in fact we can separate the two? How do they serve the plot? If we follow Nussbaum's suggestion, Peckinpah's film is not so much an explicit commentary on violence or a sort of directive to viewers to think a particular thing or feel a certain way (though the director would argue otherwise) as it is an invitation for reflection and meditation, a vehicle for questions about violence of both the

psychological and physical varieties; the film's depiction and framing of rape and violence, then, forces us to consider difficult questions about them.

To continue pursuing this line of thought, I return to Frye, who writes: “Tragedy is intelligible, not in the sense of having any pat moral to go with it, but in the sense that Aristotle had in mind when he spoke of discovery or recognition as essential to the tragic plot. Tragedy is intelligible because its catastrophe is plausibly related to its situation” (41). In philosophical terms, of course, “intelligible” means that something is understandable by intellect and *not* by the senses alone. We can, for example, understand why David reacts violently during the siege even if we do not think his behavior is just. We might understand why Amy appears to “enjoy” the rape even though Venner's actions offend us deeply. But a tragedy, as Frye says, need not have or present a “pat moral.” Indeed, the best tragedies present a series of connected events, which happen to or are experienced by particular characters and, because these characters are individuals, i.e. not caricatures, the plot really cannot moralize or be prescriptive in the way that Kael, for example, suggests through her reading of the film as misogynistic. In other words, we as viewers can empathize with characters but we are not to mistake those characters as representatives of ourselves—we can approach an understanding of their fears, desires, motivations, and actions, but we cannot and should not conflate ourselves with them. When Kael suggests that Peckinpah, through Amy, is saying that women want to be raped, for example, she is denying the Aristotelian intelligible. What Peckinpah does through *Straw Dogs*, intentionally or not, is ask us a) to think about and possibly understand why *these* particular characters behave the way they do given their particular traits and circumstances, and b) to ask ourselves, in turn, to

reflect on the moral questions presented, to ask ourselves how we might react similarly or differently to comparable circumstances and *why*.

The effectiveness of such a methodology is dependent on a variety of factors, of course. Indeed, this is the line Peckinpah walks: if his “hero,” David, is too dislikable or reacts to his conditions in a way that is too unbelievable, the filmmaker runs the risk of alienating the audience. David, because *Straw Dogs* is a tragedy, must be flawed; however, his flaws must not render him fully unsympathetic. In a response to those critics who have attacked the depiction of Amy in *Straw Dogs*, Michael Sragow, in “From *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* to *Straw Dogs*: The Narrative Brilliance of Sam Peckinpah,” points out that the character of David is equally imperfect though ultimately intelligible. Sragow writes, “Peckinpah never denigrates David's ambition as a mathematician working on an astral physics project, but he does despise David's smugness toward everyone else, especially Amy, and his inability to balance his personal and professional life” (75). He continues:

David instigates this silliness [e.g. “cruel teasing interspersed with childish byplay and sex”] as much as Amy does, as a way of consolidating his position of pseudo-maturity and mastery: in a queasy-comical scene, he starts out berating her for acting like a fourteen-year-old and ends up joking that he freaks out for eight-year-olds. He is, in a way, the bigger child, selfish and sullen. (75)

While other critics have argued that David is, in fact, a villain (and I don't necessarily disagree with this assertion), he is a villain in the way that Frankenstein's monster is, i.e. he is a stranger who is—paradoxically, considering his occupation—incapable of dealing with disconcerting



predicaments in a rational way. Arguably, his failure here is what makes him at least a bit pitiable and, in turn, deserving of our commiseration. As Frye explains:

In romance the characters are still largely dream-characters; in satire they tend to be caricatures; in comedy their actions are twisted to fit the demands of a happy ending. In full tragedy the main characters are emancipated from dream, an emancipation which is at the same time a restriction, because the order of nature is present. However thickly strewn a tragedy may be with ghosts, portents, witches, or oracles, we know that the tragic hero cannot simply rub a lamp and summon a genie to get him out of trouble. (206-7)

Kael, as I suggested earlier, misinterprets *Straw Dogs* as a satire, i.e. she sees the characters as caricatures, but Frye's explanation of tragedy, I think, is most fitting with regard to this film. David's inability to "summon a genie" and the responsibility he thus has for his flawed behavior and actions is what a) qualifies the film as tragic and b) marks David as a—partially, at least—sympathetic character. The tragedy is heightened, of course, through his alienation from both his wife and the villagers. While David remains ignorant of Amy's rape, for example, the audience cannot forget it. If Amy did indeed "enjoy" it, which is a position that I do not think can be adequately defended, we pity David for choosing to stay with and defend her, as she could be seen as having "betrayed" him and, perhaps consequently, the villagers did not target her during the siege. And if Amy did not "enjoy" the rape, as I believe and have tried to demonstrate above, David is further emotionally isolated from her by virtue of the fact that she is not comfortable telling him about it, either because she knows he will not confront the men or because she probably rightly suspects he will somehow blame her for the incident. Regardless,

David's regrettable yet ultimately “intelligible” behavior is what renders the film a tragedy; further, the rape and the siege (along with the incredible tension that precedes these events), as unbearable as they can be, are necessary for viewers to recognize David's tragic intelligibility, in particular.

As Dukore notes in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, “The climactic war against the House of Sumner, so to speak, occupies more than a fourth of the film” and “[e]ach phase of the siege is a minidrama, with a beginning and end, and a conflict different from those of the phases before and after” (97). In a way, these “phases” serve to create a kind of mise en abyme, each intensifying the tragedy. Another dramatic technique Peckinpah employs that serves a similar function is “reversals and recognitions,” which Aristotle calls in *Poetics* “the most important devices by which tragedy sways emotion” (12). Aristotle defines “reversal” as “a change to the opposite in the actions being performed, as stated—and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity” (18). The reversal in *Straw Dogs* is, of course, David's evolution (or devolution) from insecure intellectual to savage, merciless brute. “Recognition,” Aristotle says, “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune” (18). In the film, David becomes aware of his ignorance, as I discussed earlier, and experiences this kind of recognition; the enmity disclosed is, ultimately, between him and arguably everyone else in his world, except for Niles, the other obvious outcast. And, finally: “So there are these two parts of the plot—reversal and recognition; a third is suffering. Of these, reversal and recognition have already been discussed; *suffering* is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)” (19). Aristotle's definition does a few things: first,

it is a retort of sorts to those critics who suggest it is inappropriate to apply the ideas in *Poetics* to film, as Aristotle's examples of suffering (deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings, etc.) often occurred offstage in the theater. His reference to them here does not suggest the anticipation of cinema, of course, but he was clearly open to and supportive of the innovation and evolution of dramatic presentation; further, his own use of analogies suggests Aristotle would have supported the application of his ideas to other mediums. *Straw Dogs* (and Peckinpah's films generally) exemplifies Aristotelian suffering; moreover, it meets two of his other criteria for tragedy: reversal and recognition. The second thing this definition does is contextualize the brutality in and the discomfort inspired by the film, i.e. if we apply Aristotle's theory of tragedy to *Straw Dogs*, the events in the film no longer appear gratuitous but, instead, serve a clear dramatic purpose. Peckinpah's aestheticized depiction of violence serves this purpose, too, as I have discussed.

Those familiar with *Poetics* might object to the above for one reason in particular. As Aristotle writes elsewhere in his text: “It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. [...] Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars” (16). His use of the terms “universals” and “particulars” is ostensibly problematic, as I argued earlier that Peckinpah's characters—or those in any form of “poetry”—are not meant to represent us as viewers or any particular group, e.g. Amy is not *women*; she is one woman. However, it is reasonable to assume that Aristotle intended for “universals” to represent something like the concept of universal human truths—that we will all suffer to some degree, for example, or that miscommunication between people is inevitable—and

not in the reductionist sense. “Particulars,” then, might be analogous to “details” in the way that history gives us specifics about individual (and, importantly, *real*) lives. It is impossible to say for certain, though, as Aristotle does not further explore in *Poetics* the tension or distinction between the universal and the particular.

There remains the question of whether David qualifies as a hero, villain, or something else entirely. If my case for *Straw Dogs* as a classical tragedy with reversal/recognition (i.e. as Aristotle said, “a change not *to* good fortune *from* bad fortune, but (on the contrary) *from* good fortune *to* bad fortune—and this must be due not to depravity but to a serious error on the part of someone of the kind specified”—as opposed to irony or generic action or exploitation film) is to stand, Hoffman's David must meet Aristotle's standard for a compelling, complex protagonist as he presents it when discussing the best kinds of tragic plot (21). Aristotle writes, “We are left, therefore, with the person intermediate between these. This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (21). David rather clearly qualifies, though the concept of “error” here deserves some clarification. In *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, Dukore writes, “According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, *hamartia*, which is a mistake or error (chapter 13), brings about *catharsis*, which consists of pitiful and fearful acts that purge these emotions (chapter 6)” (95). This definition is lacking, however, as Aristotle did not insist that *hamartia* (or “error”) necessarily lead to or result in *catharsis*, though it certainly can. First, as Malcolm Heath writes in the introduction to his translation of *Poetics*: “[K]*atharsis* does not purge the emotion, in the sense of getting rid of it; it gets rid of an emotional excess and thus leaves the emotion in a more balanced state, mitigating the tendency to feel it

inappropriately. Why should this be pleasurable? From an Aristotelian point of view any process that restores one to a natural or healthy state is pleasurable” (xl). What is most important here is the distinction Heath makes between a total purge of particular emotions or feelings and the restoration of balance. While many scholars—and even Peckinpah himself—have cited catharsis as a justification of the highly aestheticized violence in Peckinpah's films, they often mistake cathartic purge as a total elimination of violent impulses in viewers. What Heath suggests, however, is that only “excess” impulses are removed, which in turn suggests that some feelings of pity and fear—and, by extension, anger and aggression—are normal, healthy, and even necessary in human beings. As Heath writes:

References to “healing” and “relief” imply that *katharsis* does in some sense put right something that is wrong with us [and that by] stimulating the emotion to which they are excessively prone, tragedy discharges the tendency to excess; it thus relieves the pressure which their disordered emotional make-up exerts on them, so that in ordinary life they will not be so prone to indulge the emotion in question. (xxxix)

In other words, through the display of violence, Peckinpah is asking viewers to confront their own fear and aggression, to ask themselves not how to totally eliminate these feelings but how we can live with and manage them in an appropriate way. We can say that Peckinpah turned out to be wrong or even naïve regarding this concept, but there is no reason to doubt his sincerity, i.e. his belief that catharsis is a real and productive phenomenon, just as there is no reason to doubt Aristotle's. Still, whether David manages his aggressive impulses in an appropriate way is an open question. On the one hand, he is left without many options once the siege begins: he can

turn over Niles, a defenseless man, who will almost certainly be killed or, at least, savagely beaten by the mob of townies, or he can protect Niles and his own home and family. Of course, David's own behavior earlier in the film can arguably be seen as having at least contributed to the fact that he is faced with this choice (and I would go so far as to argue he is largely responsible for nearly all of the tragedy in *Straw Dogs*). Another question Peckinpah leaves with viewers is whether David makes the right choice in defending Niles through savage brutality. A second point of clarification: Heath writes, "The Greek word *hamartia* covers making a mistake or getting something wrong in the most general sense" (xxxii). He continues, "*Hamartia*, then, includes errors made in ignorance or through misjudgment; but it will also include moral errors of a kind which do not imply wickedness" (xxxiii). Whether one sees David as a hero, villain, or something in between almost wholly rests on the question of his "error," i.e. if one believes Peckinpah presents David as a victorious hero at the film's conclusion, then there is no error or mistake and, in turn, the film is reduced to mere irony, as Kael and others suggest; if, however, we view David—with his broken glasses and psyche—as disoriented and damaged during that car ride with Niles, there is at least the chance that he views his own actions during the siege and/or those leading up to it as wrongheaded.

Specifically, what makes *Straw Dogs* a tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense, is that David in particular constantly makes mistakes, which ultimately lead to the siege (and, arguably, his moral downfall or collapse); of course, Venner and his friends did not have to attack Trencher's Farm, but David's behavior toward them—and, even more importantly, toward Amy—makes this outcome more and more likely, if not inevitable, as the narrative progresses. But it is this idea of *hamartia*, or David's error(s), that makes the film and David compelling: he does not recognize

his mistakes as he makes them and, in turn, cannot anticipate the consequences. He is not malicious or evil, and he is not a villain in the traditional sense; instead, he is insecure and confused, occasionally *appearing* to others as villainous, and this gives his character depth and makes him worthy of our pity. Heath's description of the most effective type of protagonist in an "ideal tragic plot" describes David almost perfectly:

So the ideal tragic plot cannot be constructed around an exceptionally virtuous person or a wicked person; it must therefore be based on someone between these two—broadly speaking virtuous, but not outstandingly so. Because their virtue is not outstanding, we do not find their downfall morally repellent; because their downfall is undeserved, we can pity them. (xxxi)

Again, David's errors propel the film's action, i.e. each "mistake" intensifies the drama and drives the characters toward confrontation. The causal link between character and action is, as Seymour Chatman explains in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, of utmost importance, particularly in tragedy. As Chatman writes, "It has been argued, since Aristotle, that events in narratives are radically correlative, enchainning, entailing. Their sequence, runs the traditional argument, is not simply linear but causative" (45). He continues, discussing Paul Goodman's *The Structure of Literature*:

[Goodman] goes on to say: "The formal analysis of a poem [or any drama, really] is largely the demonstration of a probability through all the parts. Or better, in the beginning anything is possible; in the middle things become probable; in the ending everything is necessary." This is an important insight: the working out of plot (or at least some plots) is a process of declining or narrowing possibility. The

choices become more and more limited, and the final choice seems not a choice at all, but an inevitability. (46)

The key here, I think, is the detail or intricacy to which Chatman and Goodman refer with regard to plot. In a tragedy, each event—particularly the “mistakes”—is *necessary*. If one looks at *Straw Dogs* as something other than tragedy, for example, David's behavior earlier in the film serves no purpose other than to create ‘little-d’ drama; as a tragedy, however, David's actions are needed to bring about his “recognition” and “reversal,” and to propel the character into emotional and moral chaos, which is further intensified for us through Amy's rape. Because *Straw Dogs* is a tragedy, David's behavior and its consequences are necessary in a way they would not be in mere irony. In other words, David is responsible for his own downfall and, thus, despite contrary claims from Kael and others, cannot be seen—or could not have been intended to be seen—as heroic, despite his physical victory over the intruders. Indeed, his “victory” is pathetic and the violence that leads to it is regrettable to David.

Further, as Chatman notes, suspense—which is a key feature of tragedy—is desired over surprise, as the latter is a gimmick with little payoff for the viewer or reader; in suspense/tragedy, however, a character's “doom” may surprise a work's hero but does not surprise the audience because the author has prepared us for it through foreshadowing, etc., as Peckinpah does with the man trap (59). Hitchcock was a master of this, of course, as he reminds us many times in *Sabotage* (1936), for example, that the bomb Stevie is carrying will explode at a specific time. Aristotle again on the distinction between simple and complex plots:

By *complex*, I mean one in which the change of fortune involves reversal or recognition or both. These must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that



they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability. There is an important difference between a set of events happening *because* of certain other events and *after* certain other events.

(18)

And with regard to the specific events that together constitute a narrative, Aristotle writes:

The imitation is not just of a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity. These effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another. This will be more astonishing than if they come about spontaneously or by chance, since even chance events are found most astonishing when they appear to have happened as if for a purpose. (17)

This attention to craft and careful plotting, in terms of both suspense and the causative relationship between events, further elevates tragedy above irony and other modes—tragic works are those that can be returned to by viewers and readers, as we understand and experience them as puzzles. As Heath clarifies:

[W]hen something happens *both* unexpectedly *and* nevertheless as a necessary or probable consequence of what has gone before, this combination increases the audience's astonishment and thus enhances the emotional impact of events. This is important: Aristotle's preoccupation with necessary and probable connection is not the product of an abstract formalism; he believes that there is an intimate connection between the cohesion of the plot and the emotional impact at which tragedy aims. (xlix)

In *Straw Dogs*, for example, the man trap is introduced early in the film as a gift from Amy to David and is, of course, used as a deadly weapon during the climactic siege. Upon repeated viewings, I might come to understand this instrument as something more than a prop that inspires conversation between David and the workers when they help him hang it above his mantel; I might, say, recognize its potentially symbolic value (e.g. as *vagina dentata*, as Michael Bliss curiously suggests in *Justified Lives: Morality & Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*) and, at the very least, the way it works as a Chekhovian plot device, foreshadowing the violence to come and, in turn, heightening the suspense throughout the film, i.e. we know it will be used, but we do not know when, how, or why. Further, as Michael Bliss argues, “The rape sequence [in *Straw Dogs*] is certainly shocking, as it should be. However, its frightening aspect does not derive from surprise; we expect some sort of exaggerated response from the workers given the dialogue concerning the [hunting] expedition, the subtle teasing of David, and the repeated suggestive references to shooting” (151). These are the lines to which Bliss refers:

Venner:           Mr. Sumner, would you like to shoot with us sometime?

David:            Oh, I've, uh, I've never hunted much.

Scutt:            Oh, but you've shot, Mr. Sumner?

Venner:           At Trencher's, good shooting's right outside the door.

The suspense here, unlike surprise, serves to build tension; the effect is unsettling and even disturbing in a way that quick shocks and revelations cannot be.

Some scholars, like Thomas Leitch, however, are suspicious of the ways in which contemporary storytellers use suspense, particularly in “action” films. Writing in “Aristotle v. the Action Film” from *New Hollywood Violence*, Leitch says: “Just as the target audiences for

musicals or hard-core pornography look forward to the song-and-dance numbers or the sex scenes their genres distinctively feature, action viewers are less interested in each new story as the Aristotelian *imitation of an action* than in a *collection of actions* of the sort Aristotle called spectacles” (122). Interestingly, despite his goal to show “just how remote is Hollywood's idea of action from Aristotle's,” Leitch's invocation of Carol Clover here and his apparent criticism of “action viewers” serve to support my aforementioned reading of *Straw Dogs* since they illustrate at least one way in which the film—with its complexity in terms of character, narrative, editing, etc.—does not qualify as a mere “action” film, as Kael and others have categorized it (104).

## **Excess Ain't Rebellion: Capital, Rejection, and Individuation in Sam Peckinpah's "Road Movies"**

### **Preface:**

A common thread running through much of Peckinpah's work – at least the Westerns and his road movies, the latter being in many ways derivative of the former – is the characters' need of money to do what they think is good and appropriate, even or especially when this conflicts with the morals or customs of the culture in which they find themselves; for Peckinpah, this means escaping the hold of a corrupt society in order to start a family in a pastoral and uncivilized or uncorrupted place. Moreover, these characters will do relatively objectionable or morally questionable things to get the capital required to ultimately do what they think is right. In Peckinpah's world, the ends justify the means, and the presence of capitalism and the way it corrupts people make it nearly impossible for “good” characters to earn an honest living; in turn, crime is, ironically, the only way for them to ultimately live a crime-free and unburdened life. This is a theme that pervades Peckinpah's work, and his apparent obsession with the notion that people can't be truly free in the context of society is something he addresses, to varying degrees, in each of his films. It makes sense, then, that he explores this idea within the genre of road movies as, like Westerns, it allows his characters a figurative and literal means of escape: the road to freedom. That is, if these protagonists can't quite establish or realize their identities by defeating the mechanisms of oppression that surround them, they can at least travel elsewhere and fulfill what they see as their individual potential. As I'll explain in this chapter, though, Peckinpah's version of the road movie is decidedly more conservative than that of his

contemporaries. In a way, his refusal to adhere to the genre's thematic conventions is an exercise in freedom: his refusal to embrace the progressive ideals of his contemporaries in the genre was a way to declare and defend his relatively contrarian position, something his protagonists attempt to do in these very films.

### **Introduction:**

Sam Peckinpah's "road movies" – *The Getaway* (1972), *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), and *Convoy* (1978) – represent, more than anything else, a missed opportunity; that said, they are each still interesting and provocative in their own ways, especially with regard to how they represent Peckinpah's ideas about freedom and rebellion. Instead of using the fluid conventions of this evolving and exciting genre to develop or even challenge (given the ways in which society was changing) the morally conservative themes of his earlier work, which I have examined in other chapters, Peckinpah continued to celebrate in these films values such as the importance of family and loyalty. Whereas other road films of the time – like Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), and Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) – were existential meditations on alienation inspired by political assassinations, Altamont and the death of the hippie movement, the war in Vietnam (and the draft), ongoing racial tensions, the Kent State massacre, and later Watergate, Peckinpah's road movies were, despite his earlier technical innovations, relatively conventional and arguably banal. *Alfredo Garcia*, for example, in which Warren Oates' character drives around with a decapitated head as his passenger for a considerable amount of time, ends with the death of its protagonist; this death, however, is presented as a form of justice (Bennie, who adopts the cynicism and violence

of the capitalist forces he earlier opposes, must die in Peckinpah's world) and not a comment on nihilism, hopelessness, and rejection/denial as are, say, the deaths of Billy and Captain America in *Easy Rider* or Kowalski in *Vanishing Point*. That said, Peckinpah did examine in his road movies the intersection of the individual (especially with regard to individuation or the creation of one's identity), freedom, escape/liberation (through both travel and death), and capital, i.e. as he did in his earlier work, Peckinpah was critical in these films of the effects of capitalism, power, and corruption on the common man. In short, Peckinpah did rather interestingly, despite his relatively conservative moralizing on other matters, rebuke the ways in which capital can alienate and dehumanize people, essentially subjugating them and denying them the ability to create their own identities and morals. For this reason, his road movies are worthy of examination.

While road movies obviously existed before the 1960s, films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* arguably reignited and reinvented the genre, and these films reflected the anxieties of their time. The forces against which the protagonists of these films were fighting mirrored The Establishment, e.g. corrupt law enforcement officials, representatives of capitalism, the military-industrial complex, and, except where Peckinpah was concerned, outdated "conservative" cultural mores in general. (Interestingly, Peckinpah was fascinated with Penn's film, and he reportedly had a print of *Bonnie and Clyde* on the set while filming *The Wild Bunch* (1969); it seems obvious now that *Bonnie and Clyde*'s thematic content as well as Penn's innovative visual style would have resonated with and inspired Peckinpah, and it is significant that he would go on to produce some violent, anti-establishment road movies of his own.) Road movies of this time were, again, generally reflective of society's concerns: they

were explicit critiques of cultural and political issues. Today's road movies, on the other hand, do not often aim to explore, let alone critique, society beyond the self; they tend to be solipsistic, especially when compared to the philosophically (even if we were presented with a sort of hopeless nihilism) and politically charged, though sometimes implicitly, films of previous decades, e.g. *Easy Rider*, Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and *Vanishing Point*. Peckinpah, with the commercially successful *Convoy*, produced one of the last “serious” road movies of the '70s, though the film is admittedly more than a little ridiculous in several ways, which at least in retrospect seemed to signal the end for a certain type of message-centered road film.

In her book on the aesthetics and rituals of the British indie music scene, *Empire of Dirt*, anthropologist Wendy Fonarow observes, “Differentiation is at the heart of the process of definition” (26). In other words, one comes to realize and acknowledge his or her values and beliefs – and, in turn, creates an identity – through an examination of others', rejecting those that seem somehow incongruous to one's idea of him- or herself. Moreover, philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm, in his essay “Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem” from the book *On Disobedience: Why Freedom Means Saying 'No' to Power*, expresses what is in some ways a similar idea: “If mankind commits suicide it will be because people will obey those who command them to push the deadly buttons; because they will obey the archaic passions of fear, hate, and greed” (4). For Fromm, rejection and rebellion are not only necessary for the survival of the species, but these acts are also the means by which one creates and expresses his or her individual identity. He continues, “Obedience to a person, institution or power [...] is submission; it implies the abdication of my autonomy and the acceptance of a

foreign will or judgment in place of my own. Obedience to my own reason or conviction [...] is not an act of submission but one of affirmation” (5). One's conviction, Fromm argues, is *part* of him or her, if that conviction is “authentic.”

The ideas Fonarow and Fromm express regarding differentiation, disobedience, and individuation are certainly provocative in their own right, but they are also quite informative when considering the work of Sam Peckinpah, who so often – that is to say, almost always – made films about men who were at odds with the institutions and societal norms around them. These protagonists are, to put it simply, outsiders. Significantly, though, they are typically portrayed as more morally good than the forces to which they are opposed; moreover, they see justice and freedom as the ultimate of human rights, and they are often willing to risk their lives for their causes. The courage required to do this, of course, is incredible. What's more, their rejection of established beliefs and practices (especially when it comes to matters of money and corruption), which are often represented as archaic and unjust, is somewhat paradoxically a positive or affirmative act. Or, as Fromm writes in “Prophets and Priests,” “Disobedience, then, in the sense in which we will use it here, is an act of the affirmation of reason and will. It is not primarily an attitude directed *against* something, but *for* something: for man's capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see” (24). The difference between acting against something and for something is slight, to be sure, but certainly a consideration of one's motive is the key to making this distinction; rebellion for its own sake, in other words, is a negative or even nihilistic act, whereas “morally” motivated rejection is an affirmative one, i.e. it is a defense of one's identity, integrity, and freedom.



In American cinema, two genres, perhaps more than any others, explored this tension: Westerns and road movies. American Westerns quite obviously serve as precursors of the road movie, especially those like *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) and *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), etc. that feature men on a trip, often motivated by the potential for monetary gain, who are antagonized by representatives of the law and/or big business. (It is no coincidence, too, that the road movie became popular in America as Westerns fell out of favor with audiences; the road movie took some of the conventions of Westerns but updated them by substituting cars for horses, for example, and by speaking to changing, less conservative attitudes in society.<sup>7</sup>) Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* and *The Getaway* are examples of this, but so is *Convoy*. *Convoy* is particularly interesting for how opposed, in terms of aesthetics and tone, it is to the rest of Peckinpah's oeuvre, even ostensibly similar films like *Garcia*. While there are, as Pauline Kael in "Circles and Squares" and others have noted, obvious problems with auteur theory, there is no denying that Peckinpah's body of work is unique with respect to other filmmakers and is infused with his signature themes, character archetypes, and filming and editing techniques. *Convoy*, however, in its arguable banality is the most unusual of his films relative to his other work, though it shares much in common with other commercial road movies of the late '70s. Back to the original point: as David Laderman writes in his introduction to *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*, "The driving force propelling most road movies [...] is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique" (1). Laderman emphasizes the genre's rebellion against what he calls conservative social norms, writing, "Such traveling, coded as defamiliarization, likewise suggests a mobile refuge from social circumstances felt to be

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<sup>7</sup> Though, this is precisely what makes Peckinpah's road movies interesting: they contained the themes present in his Westerns while opposing a more general cultural shift. He, like his protagonists, was rebelling against expectations, conventions, and so on.

lacking or oppressive in some way [and often feature] desperate characters lighting out for something better, someplace else” (2). The road in these films, he argues, “represents the unknown,” a hope for, not a promise of, a more humane way of living. But, again, what makes Peckinpah's road movies unique is that they, unlike those being made by Hopper, Hellman, etc., celebrate “conservative social norms,” and the characters in these films pursue “mobile refuge” as a way to reestablish these values, not unlike a cult leader who builds his compound in a rural area so he will be free from the influence and control of society and its laws; the main characters in *The Getaway*, for example, must flee to Mexico in order to start a family (or so we are meant to believe), as America is no longer hospitable to honest living, i.e. “conservative” enough, as the characters in this film can only provide for themselves by robbing banks and committing other crimes. For Peckinpah, then, “society” has been corrupted by capitalism, and his characters – who are exploited by businessmen, politicians, and law enforcement officials – can only find their freedom outside of it via the road.

Of course, Sam Peckinpah was hardly the only filmmaker to explore the values, function, and individuation of the “outsider,” but he did this more frequently than most others; his obsession with rejection and rebellion is expressed, usually explicitly, in each of his 15 movies. Films such as *The Wild Bunch* and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), for example, present and to some extent explore men who are unwilling or unable to conform to the changing society around them; further, a movie like *Straw Dogs* (1971) illustrates the contrast between an urban intellectual and a mob of uneducated country laborers. And, while Peckinpah began this exploration when making his early Westerns, he widened his scope throughout the 1970s and made a few interesting – albeit in different ways – “road movies,” a genre that is perhaps the

most appropriate vehicle for his ostensibly antisocial denouncements. What I will argue in this chapter, however, and it is an idea that runs through this project, is that Peckinpah's themes are, despite the filmmaker's reputation, remarkably conservative, i.e. they champion cooperation, family values, and loyalty; the only thing to which they are opposed is the corruption of these mores (which, in his films, usually happens as the result of the influence of money). We see this to be true in each of his three road movies: the protagonists in *The Getaway* are thieves, but they ultimately escape the hopelessly corrupt United States to, we are supposed to believe, start a family in the pastoral land of Mexico; the protagonist of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* dies at the end of the film because he has engaged in wanton violence and comes to represent values that are antithetical to the moral fabric of Peckinpah's ideal society; and *Convoy* celebrates hard-working, blue collar men and women, and it offers the rather uncontroversial argument that people deserve dignity, which they are often denied by the representatives of capitalism (though I am rather certain Peckinpah did not intentionally do this, he invokes Marx's ideas about the relationship between commodity, value, and the exploitation of labor in this film).

As controversial and technically innovative as Peckinpah was, he is ultimately a conservative figure with regard to his themes and messaging. What is more, his tendency toward sentimentality and arguably misguided nostalgia – i.e., longing for a time that never really existed – pervade even those films that, given the updated conventions of their genre, should have been the most daring and inventive: his “road movies.” In this chapter, I will critically examine Peckinpah's road movies and discuss the ways in which they champion conservative values while largely failing to be thematically risky or technically innovative (though, again, this rebellion is precisely what makes his road movies worthy of consideration). To do this, I will

briefly discuss some key features of the road movie genre, and then I'll analyze *The Getaway* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (*Convoy*, however, is arguably not substantial enough to warrant a lengthy discussion<sup>8</sup>) using ideas from theorists like Erich Fromm, Carl Jung, and David

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<sup>8</sup> By the late 1970s and into the early '80s, road movies lost much of their ability or power to function as social criticism, as, somewhat ironically – given the opposition of exploitation and the establishment the films in this genre from the early '70s exhibited – they had come to be seen by studios as major cash-cows. Comedies like *The Gumball Rally* (1976), *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), and *The Cannonball Run* (1981) are just a few examples of successful attempts capitalize on the commercial potential of the genre. Road race and trucker films comprised some sub-genres, and Peckinpah's *Convoy* (1978) is a prime example of the latter. Inspired by a novelty country song about CB radio, *Convoy* has rightly not received much praise from critics. Michael Bliss, in *Justified Lives*, for example, calls it Peckinpah's weakest film and notes, “The fight [scene] in *Convoy* has too many slow-motion shots of men falling down, so that even this usually successful technique fails to keep us from being bored” (288). Dukore, writing in *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, is even more critical: “Its redolence of existentialism and of Peckinpah's familiar themes reveals *Convoy* to be an empty shell” (59). Finally, Stephen Prince, writing in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, goes even further by calling the film an “embarrassment” (6) and a “sorry spectacle” (155). While it's true that many road movies of this time lacked, at least relatively speaking, teeth, *Convoy* is particularly noteworthy because it represents Peckinpah's penultimate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to convince studio executives that he was still competent (while *Cross of Iron*, the film that preceded this one, demonstrates the director's abilities, it performed poorly at the box office and was not particularly well received at the time). Peckinpah's addiction issues, however, seem to have affected not only his judgment in choosing to shoot this film's script but also the decisions he made on set. As Prince notes, *Convoy*'s “script was so devoid of the attributes that one would associate with the work of a major director that Peckinpah's agreement to do the film was widely perceived as a terminal error and further proof of a career beyond salvage” (216). Additionally, Prince claims that the “concept unifying the film was so badly out of focus that Peckinpah considered using out-of-focus shots to portray the convoy and to suggest that the political movement it symbolized was fatuous” (216). The theme of *Convoy*, however, is similar to what Peckinpah presents in both *The Getaway* and *Alfredo Garcia*: the struggle of the proletariat against corrupt agents of power. It is doubtful that the director saw the political movement represented in *Convoy* as truly fatuous, although the actual narrative is. While most critics agree that this film is incoherent at worst and boring at best, as David Weddle notes in *If They Move ... Kill 'Em*, “The final irony of the *Convoy* debacle was that it turned out to be Peckinpah's highest-grossing picture, the biggest box-office hit of his career” (518). Peckinpah got the financial success he wanted, but it was arguably the result of the film's subject matter (and the drawing power of its stars, Kris Kristofferson and Ali MacGraw) and not because of anything he did as a filmmaker. He would only direct one more feature after this, 1983's *The Osterman Weekend*.

Like Peckinpah's other road movies, *Convoy* depicts the tension between average, working-class people – in this case, a group of truckers – and those who wield power and control over them, portrayed here by police officers and politicians. As Michael Bliss writes in *Justified Lives*, “Clearly, the truckers' passions and pleasures threaten the instincts and behaviors of the country's traditionalists, who are represented in the film by short-haired policemen” (291). Rubber Duck (Kristofferson) becomes the reluctant leader of the titular convoy after a local sheriff, Dirty Lyle (Ernest Borgnine), extorts money from the truckers in a clear abuse of power and, later, when the team gets into a fight with police over racist comments they make about one of truckers, Spider Mike (Franklyn Ajaye), who is trying to make it home to his pregnant wife. The convoy must make it across the state line in order to avoid prosecution for the fight, but their mission changes once Mike is captured by the police and held in jail. The convoy grows as it is joined by other truckers, and it becomes something of a phenomenon, even being welcomed into one town by a marching band, when it draws attention from the media. A politician, Governor Jerry Haskins (Seymour Cassel), offers to help Duck and the truckers but only because he sees Duck as a folk hero who could help bolster his popularity if he aligns himself with Duck. Haskins claims to want to help, but he won't spring Mike from jail; in turn, Duck refuses the politician's opportunistic, exploitative offer and leaves the convoy with Melissa

Harvey to make sense of the intersections of capital, violence, and individuation in these works.

The point I wish to underscore here is that while Peckinpah's road movies have interesting moments, their themes are ultimately conservative and arguably trite, especially when compared

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(MacGraw) to go free his captured friend. Duck's defiant spirit is repeatedly made explicitly clear: the truckers crash through roadblocks and bypass weigh stations (representative of society's attempt to control them), and Duck says to one cop who identifies himself as a representative of the law, "Well, piss on you, and piss on your law." The badges the officers wear are presented as shields that allow them to deflect judgment and accountability, and this is principally what Duck and the other truckers object to: the abuse of power and authority. The members of the convoy abandon their jobs in pursuit of their freedom (thus clearly rejecting the *having* mode in favor of *being*), and they ultimately aim to escape into Mexico, a popular destination for the protagonists in Peckinpah's films.

It is never made clear how the truckers (and the traveling hippie evangelist in his bus) who join the convoy early on learn of the "movement" or why exactly they choose to join, and it is also not clear why people see Duck as a hero since he is essentially acting as little more than the leader of a long motorcade, but frankly there is a lot about *Convoy* that does not make sense. Peckinpah, however, does include many figures and events that support his theme of individuality and freedom. For example, Duck chooses not to join the Teamsters, though the union would afford him a certain degree of protection (presumably, he sees the organization as corrupt and/or sees his "independence" as paramount). Additionally, Lyle crashes through a religious billboard during the early stages of the big chase and, in so doing, symbolically destroys the ancient institution; significantly, Fromm cites religion in *The Sane Society* as an example of one way in which humans attempt to establish "substitutes for a truly individual sense of identity" (62). Further, at one point, Duck is asked about the purpose of the convoy, and he replies, "The purpose of this convoy is to keep moving." As Bliss notes, "Despite *Convoy's* attempt to portray its truckers as rebels, they seem to be nothing other than working-class men with no significant political ethic—at least, none that we can divine through *Convoy's* awkward script" (291). The road for these figures clearly represents the potential to escape and a way to reject what they view as the "establishment," e.g. police and politicians. They are not necessarily making any explicit political statement, though, as Duck's vague answer suggests; instead, their rebellion against racism, corruption, and exploitation is a kind of generalized angst that is underscored during the film's conclusion when the convoy prematurely leaves a huge public funeral service being held for Duck, who the authorities believe to be dead, being attended and used by Haskins for his own benefit. In the politician's speech during the memorial, Haskins says the truckers carry on the cowboy tradition and that Duck "gave his life to dramatize a cause so vital to us all." Haskins, however, cannot identify this "cause" – probably because, other than the vague notion of individuality, the film never makes it clear – and the truckers leave in disgust, making clear their refusal to be co-opted or exploited by the establishment, which does not represent their values and best interests.

Duck is revealed to have survived the crash in which the authorities believed he perished (he is hiding in one of the trucks at his own funeral service), however, and the film suggests he and Melissa will remain a couple. The aforementioned crash is reminiscent of the one that kills Kowalski at the end of *Vanishing Point*, as Duck drives into a barricade seemingly prepared to die, but Peckinpah's sentimentality demands that his protagonist, because of his moral superiority, not only survive but end up with his romantic interest. Unlike Bennie in *Alfredo Garcia*, Duck acts honorably throughout this film, and thus he is rewarded. While nothing close to a masterpiece, *Convoy* does conclude Peckinpah's trilogy of road movies by repeating the romantic themes concerning individuality and individuation introduced in the first two and, while the film has plenty of flaws, David Weddle correctly notes it has its good qualities, too: "Amidst the rubble of the final product it was possible, if one looked hard enough, to spot the glittering fragments of a once-great talent; the old poetry still sang forth here and there in the images of the big rigs thundering across the vast expanse of the American West" (518).

to films of the same genre that were produced around the same time; moreover, Peckinpah's commentary on the importance of family, the tensions between freedom and capital, the function – or even necessity – of violence, and the place of the individual within a greater society is, despite what the director said in interviews, closer to Nixon's ideology than that of a free-spirited radical, which is how Peckinpah often presented himself.

Indeed, as Fromm writes with regard to the concept of disobedience, the refusal or rejection expressed by Peckinpah's characters is not nihilistic in nature, though they are often seen this way; instead, they are opposed to the established – but corrupted – order, seeking a more just and humane (as they see it) alternative, though they lack the knowledge or, in some cases, power required to create a new paradigm. There is, then, something essentially optimistic and idealistic about these characters' apparent negativity and the violence it inspires: they are disappointed because their wholesome hopes, dreams, and longings meet constant opposition, and, as a response, they seek out and quest for their desired alternative, journeys so appropriately set on and around roads, which represent both leaving something behind and arriving somewhere new just as individuation, as I noted when discussing Fonarow above, involves both distinguishing oneself from some and forming affiliations with others. But these are the same ideas Peckinpah expressed in his earlier Westerns. Moreover, Peckinpah never did anything particularly imaginative within the reimagined and revitalized road movie genre, i.e. he did not explore the bleakly existential questions we see in films like *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point*, and even *Five Easy Pieces*; no, Peckinpah rather exploitatively used the popular genre for its commercial benefits, recycling the themes from his earlier works and placing them on the road, as it were, arguably in an effort to cash in. That said, these films are interesting precisely

because they are so different relative to their contemporaries; the rebellion Peckinpah's characters champion manifests itself in Peckinpah's refusal to adopt the attitudes and themes of his contemporaries.

### **Capitalism, Disillusionment, the 1970s, and the Road Movie:**

In *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, David A. Cook comments on what, specifically, made the '70s such a unique period for American cinema. In particular, Cook points to the “degree of self-examination extraordinary for this country in any medium at any time” and says “American commercial cinema was experimenting with social criticism” while also, and interestingly, making money in the process (xv). This criticism via self-examination was leveled at many facets of American culture, but the aspect that is most germane with regard to my discussion here is one that Cook makes a point of highlighting. The decade of the '70s was, he writes, “bracketed by two films, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971) and *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), that offered uncompromising critiques of frontier capitalism and, by extension, of the American economic system at large” (xv). Perhaps not coincidentally, both of these films are Westerns – this genre, it goes without saying, is particularly productive when it comes to critically examining American values and the nation's beliefs about itself, as Westerns (can) deal with the establishment and development of these values and beliefs. Of course, myth is often intertwined with belief, and in general the films of the '70s – both Westerns and non-Westerns – are remarkable for their interrogation of these intersections.

The road movie, as noted earlier, is also a good vehicle for such reflection. And even more than many Westerns made before, during, and after the '70s, the significant road movies of this era looked both outward and inward, i.e. they examined cultural values in a general sense but also took an arguably psychoanalytic approach to explorations of the individual and his/her place within that culture, especially with regard to the tension created by, as Freud has discussed, the demands of civilization on the individual. More specifically, movies like *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Five Easy Pieces*, and others explored the question of whether the individual could be both free and sane during a time of oppressive capitalism, political assassinations, and hopeless wars. Indeed, the question was: have we all gone mad? Further, is there any hope? Any meaning? Both *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point* seemed to argue there is no escape from the madness of society and its control over – or, at least, its demands on – us, i.e. if one dares to rebel, he will be hunted down and exterminated by the powers that be in the interest of maintaining order and preserving power.

While such an ostensibly bleak diagnosis – and even prognosis, i.e. things are and will remain hopeless – seems nihilistic, one can arrive at a different conclusion through an interrogation of that very concept. We might, for example, interpret these deaths as a form of liberation in the sense that, say, the protagonists in *Easy Rider* are freed through death from a cruel, oppressive, and senselessly violent world. Death, in other words, is the ultimate form of both rejection/rebellion and individuation. Critics might label such an interpretation as “nihilistic,” but using the word in this way is rather narrow. Gianni Vattimo, in *Nihilism & Emancipation*, offers an alternative. He writes, “I interpret 'nihilism' in the sense first given it by Nietzsche: the dissolution of any ultimate foundation” (xxv). Such a definition is particularly



useful when it comes to making sense of road movies of the 1970s, as it suggests the possibility that these films were more than hopeless laments; instead, they expressed the frustrations only idealists can feel, and they seem to cry for alternatives to the dominant paradigm. Vattimo continues: “The Nietzschean term nihilism acquires the sense of emancipation for me when it is read in light of another famous expression of the German philosopher: 'God is dead, and now we wish for many gods to live'” (xxvi). While death is obviously not a solution, these characters' fates suggest that the status quo is unacceptable; further, their deaths illustrate the severity of the problem: capitalism and corruption are destructive forces that must be opposed.

Cook's comment above regarding the critiques in '70s cinema of “frontier capitalism” and the American economic system at large speaks to these tensions and frustrations, i.e. the desire for the freedom to create and pursue another way of being in the world, and we see the labor/capital relationship as a major contributing factor. Capitalism in these films, in other words, is the proverbial wet blanket on freedom and individuality. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey discusses the alienating effects – with regard to alienation from oneself, from one's peers, and from the economic apparatus that manages labor – of capital, and his analysis is useful when attempting to make sense of the critiques of “frontier capitalism” found in '70s cinema and, specifically, the road movie. Harvey writes that with capitalism, a contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other. While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions). (69)

He continues: “The freedom of the masses would be restricted in favour of the freedoms of the few” (70). So, while the ability to earn money ostensibly appears to be a form of freedom – and, in turn, the capital we earn would seem to provide us with the ability to purchase, as it were, additional freedoms – workers are, in the process, commodified and alienated, and this can obviously detrimentally affect one's process of individuation. Indeed, how can the individual create a unique identity if (s)he's routinely manipulated and exploited (and while this exploitation is an inherent trait of capitalism, it is exacerbated when workers are subjected to the control of corrupt banks and businessmen such as those we see in Peckinpah's films)? When industry tells you, implicitly or explicitly, that you are a mere cog in the machine and you are prohibited from, say, organizing – an idea central to Peckinpah's *Convoy* – as a means to improving your quality of life, the obvious result is a crisis of an existential nature, and that condition is precisely what many road movies from the '70s explore.

Not only are individuals forced to surrender to what Harvey, in *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, calls “the discipline of abstract forces [...] that effectively govern their relations and choices” (42), but these individuals are also “perpetually at risk of being ruled by fetishistic constructs that blind [them] to what is actually happening” (47). Many of the characters – or protagonists, at least – in '70s cinema experience precisely what Harvey describes here, i.e. they have lost control and, too, the agency required for individuation. But what makes so many of these characters interesting is that they have not been blinded; instead, they recognize that they have lost control and seek to regain it by first putting a face on the controlling “abstract forces” and then by attacking or otherwise rebelling against them. It is in this rejection and rebellion that

these characters begin the process of individuation; whether they are ultimately successful is, however, another question.

One problem these characters face once they are free (by “hitting the road,” for example) from the constraints of capitalism is creating or discovering another way of being in the world. As David Laderman writes in *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*, “Rather than leading to freedom and exploration, the early-'70s road often leads nowhere in particular, sometimes in circles, invoking a forlorn mood of wandering” (83). The road in these films can simultaneously represent hope (for something better) and frustration (over not know what or where that “something” is). Laderman, however, in contrast to Cook, argues that '70s road movies focus “on existential loss more than social critique” (83). Laderman's mistake, though, is his failure to see the relationship between the two: in other words, how the representation of existential loss can be a form of social critique, i.e. while many road movies may not offer explicit alternatives to capitalism, for example, they often examined that system's devastating effects on individuals.

Indeed, the disillusionment represented and explored in the films of this era was a sort of political statement through critique or at least via rejection of the dominant capitalist paradigm and its dehumanizing effects. The absence of clear alternatives, which is what Laderman seemingly desires, does not somehow mean the critique itself is absent. In fact, as Erich Fromm writes with regard to the process of individuation, rejection and disobedience, which road movies of the late 1960s and '70s depict in spades (and the films themselves, with regard to their unconventional narratives and so on, were a form of rejection), are among the first steps toward a more fully actualized self. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm states this explicitly: “The growing process of the emergence of the individual from his original ties [is] a process which we may call

'individuation'" (24). What's more, Fromm speaks to the difficulties of such a process, noting, "[T]he degree to which the individual, figuratively speaking, has not yet completely severed the umbilical cord which fastens him to the outside world, he lacks freedom; but these ties give him security and a feeling of belonging and of being rooted somewhere" (24). These first steps, so to speak, away from what is being rejected and toward an uncertain, potentially nonexistent future are bound to be shaky ones; further, the temptation to return to the security of the "known," an act which Fromm describes as impossible, is strong. The process, in other words, is disorienting, and one must take responsibility for his own individuation, though this begins by establishing what he is not (in terms of values, etc.) through the rejection of and rebellion against the sources of his oppression and anxiety.

To some extent, though, Laderman's analysis is correct: if we consider films like *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*, for example, it would seem that one's rebellion is hopeless and ultimately futile, as the only true escape from the demands of society and its "values," which the rebel sees as antithetical to his own, is not the road – and the path to a more liberal society it represents – but death. Of course, this is not a prescription for change, and it does not offer any practical alternatives (assuming one wants to go on living). But, again, the protagonists in these films are taking the first steps – or driving the first miles – on their path toward Frommian individuation. Arguably, they ought to fail, as any other outcome could be interpreted as unlikely or impossible, i.e. these characters are awakened but are not yet enlightened. They may be read as struggling with the existential demands of their newly found freedom. As Fromm writes in *On Disobedience: Why Freedom Means Saying "No" to Power*, "A person can become free through acts of disobedience by learning to say no to power. But not only is the capacity for disobedience

the condition for freedom; freedom is also the condition for disobedience. If I am afraid of freedom, I cannot dare say 'no,' I cannot have the courage to be disobedient” (9). Whether through exhaustion, frustration, or fear, these characters do fail, but the important point here is that their acts of disobedience are at least as affirmative as they are a form of rejection. Again, Fromm from *On Disobedience*: “Disobedience, then, in the sense in which we use it here, is an act of the affirmation of reason and will. It is not primarily an attitude directed *against* something, but *for* something: for man's capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see” (24). These protagonists are disillusioned, of course, but they are attempting to discover or create an alternative, and this act is essentially hopeful, positive, and optimistic. Returning briefly to Vattimo's definition of “nihilism,” we might see the deaths of these protagonists as an essential step in the process of individuation (not only for the individual characters but also for everyone they represent):

The hermeneutic way out of tragic and negative nihilism naturally entails the inclusion of many aspects of the latter: we might say, with Nietzsche, that it is not possible to build without destroying. Or again, and perhaps more realistically, that the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry, so that the task of secularization—that is, the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths—is an ongoing one. (xxvii)

The deaths of these characters reflect the formidability of the institutions and cultural values against which they are rebelling, and these protagonists arguably die a martyr's death: they are exterminated in the process of trying to destroy what must be destroyed – e.g. capitalism, authority, and so on – before the rebuilding of society can begin. The road here represents a way

out, a path toward an alternative space where this society might be established if it cannot be built on the ruins of the present one, but the grasp of the “authoritarian,” who will protect his existence at all costs, is strong, merciless, and far-reaching.

The feelings and experiences of the protagonists in many of these films obviously reflected the anxiety and cynicism felt by not an insignificant number of Americans during the close of the 1960s and throughout the '70s. The hippie dream arguably died – or, more accurately, was killed – in 1968 with the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, and its grave was spit upon in 1969 during The Rolling Stones' performance at the disastrous and deadly Altamont concert, which was chronicled brilliantly by Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin in the documentary *Gimme Shelter* (1970). In addition, Nixon's victory in the 1968 election and his re-election in '72, the Kent State massacre in 1970, the ongoing war in Vietnam (and, perhaps even more significantly than the war itself, the draft), the Watergate scandal, Ford's pardon of Nixon in '74, the assassination of Harvey Milk in '78, and other events all contributed to a growing sense – among young people and members of the counter-culture in particular – of powerlessness and the loss of agency. The dream of a better tomorrow was replaced by a living nightmare, and filmmakers during the '70s were working, as were the protagonists in the aforementioned films, to envision and perhaps even create a more inclusive, humane future.

As Laderman writes, “In most early-'70s road movies, the tension between rebellion and tradition [...] has been softened or muted: character and narrative drive often appear through a murky lens, or not at all. In this existential focus, the genre's core conflict with conformist society has been internalized, 'rebellion' thus becoming an amorphous anxiety about self” (83). While I do not agree entirely with Laderman's assessment, he (without appearing to do so)

invokes Freud's ideas about this tension as they are expressed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In this book, Freud examines the causes of man's frustration with the demands and limits placed on him by the civilization in which he lives, and he explores a rather provocative paradox: while one is inclined to believe he would be happier outside of civilization and away from its violence, corruption, etc., “in whatever way we may define the concept of civilization, it is a certain fact that all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization” (38). What's more, the institutions we identify as representative of “civilization” are reflections and ultimately manifestations of human will. The question, then, as Laderman rightly suggests, is this: are we running from a diseased society or are we running from ourselves, or are the two concepts are intertwined? The protagonists of early-'70s road movies in particular are to varying degrees meditating on this, though many – and this is certainly true with regard to Peckinpah's characters, in his Westerns, road movies, and (as I will explore later) war movies – seem to agree with Freud's suggestion that the “liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization” (49).

The individual and civilization are, of course, inextricably linked: societies would not exist without humans, and humans would, arguably, not be distinct from animals without their societies. But as we see in '70s road movies, particularly those from early in the decade, the society does place sometimes unreasonable and often unjust demands on its members, and these demands, which often call for a concession of what we might call “freedom,” are what these films and their characters aim to critique, and economic structures – emerging neoliberalism, in particular – are portrayed as a primary source of alienation, exploitation, and oppression. Again,

Fromm's thinking on the tensions between societies and the individuals within them is helpful here. In *Escape from Freedom* he writes, “Just as a child can never return to the mother's womb physically, so it can never reverse, psychically, the process of individuation” (29). He continues by discussing the consequences the child faces if he does attempt to reverse the process:

“Consciously the child may feel secure and satisfied, but unconsciously it realizes that the price it pays is giving up strength and the integrity of its self” (29). We might see this as a metaphor in which the child represents the individual longing for independence and the mother stands for society and its systems, namely its economic structure (which is intelligible, and thus familiar and seductive but ultimately exploitative). In terms of the films – and the cultural issues to which they respond – under consideration here, we see their protagonists beginning the process of individuation through the rejection of what they interpret as unjust economic conditions in particular, but once the “safety” of these conditions is left behind they must still work to find or establish a different way of providing for themselves (in Peckinpah's road movies, this meant the establishment of a family outside of society). Put another way by Georg Simmel in *On*

*Individuality and Social Forms*:

If every interaction among men is a sociation, conflict – after all one of the most vivid interactions, which, furthermore, cannot possibly be carried on by one individual alone – must certainly be considered a sociation. And in fact, dissociating factors – hate, envy, need, desire – are the *causes* of conflict; it breaks out because of them. Conflict is thus designed to resolve divergent dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity, even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflicting parties. (70)



If the ultimate goal is unity or harmony, then, the individual must be prepared for conflict (whether of a personal, financial, environmental, or other manner), and conflicts are best confronted with assistance from others. The hippies' solution to this problem was the commune (which we see in *Easy Rider*, for example, though such an arrangement is not hospitable to the protagonists of that film, and they fittingly die) while more traditional workers relied on labor unions, as we see in Peckinpah's *Convoy*.

The rebel, then, cannot succeed alone; he depends on other likeminded individuals, and only together do they create the relationships and, thus, conditions necessary for an alternative society. (Biker films of this era, e.g. Roger Corman's *The Wild Angels*, are something of an exception to this, though some of them explore similar themes, but those movies were generally less about social critique and were more commonly presented as exploitation.) Not only do we see this idea represented in road movies of the early 1970s, i.e. loners who do not pool their resources tend to perish, but it is one Fromm addressed in his work. Again in *Escape from Freedom*, he argues that “primary bonds” cannot be mended once they are severed. “Once paradise is lost,” he writes, “man cannot return to it” (35). The solution, he says, is for the “individualized man” to live in “active solidarity” with others, and this will “unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual” (35). Unions, of both the personal and economic varieties, are then – and somewhat ironically – critically important in the process of individuation. With regard to Peckinpah's road movies, we see this to be true: Carol and Doc survive in *The Getaway* because they have each other, Benny is gunned down at the end of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* because he loses his partner and engages in antisocial and ruthlessly violent behavior (in other words, he severs all “primary

bonds” and rejects all moral codes in favor of vengeance, and this, as Fromm says, cannot be undone), and Rubber Duck is victorious in *Convoy* because he has the help of his girlfriend and fellow truckers.

What distinguishes Peckinpah's road movies from others of the era is his ostensible obsession with the role capital (and labor/power relations) plays in the process of individuation with regard to romantic unions between men and women. He presents money, and the problems it presents as well as some of the freedom it allows individuals to essentially purchase, as the key product of and symbol for civilization. While other films of the time were responses to the various aforementioned problems in America during the late '60s and early to mid '70s, Peckinpah's focus in these films was almost exclusively on the exploitation and dehumanization of people as a result of their relationship to capital. Additionally, Peckinpah's films suggest the solution to this was to form *traditional* family units outside of the corrupted mainstream society; however, as the characters in his road movies learn, one can only do this by fighting that culture directly and taking from it the capital he needs to survive on the outside. This paradox – depending on the society to live outside of it – is problematic, as is Peckinpah's insistence that returning to The Garden, i.e. a return to the values of a mythic past, is somehow ideal or even possible. While critics label films like *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point* as nihilistic, at least they were honest enough to admit uncertainty; they were critical of the contemporary culture, as was Peckinpah, but they, to their credit, did not insist that they had the answers. Colin Wilson – who, like Fromm, wrote about the tensions between man and society – addresses this idea of honesty through the expression of uncertainty in his book *The Outsider*. Wilson writes, “The Outsider is not sure who he is. 'He has found an “I,” but it is not his true “I.”’ His main business is to find his

way back to himself” (147). When this idea is applied to Peckinpah, and specifically to the certainty he presents in his road movies, we come to see the director as less of a radical or revolutionary and, instead, as more of a delusional cultural conservative.

Despite their shortcomings, Peckinpah's road movies are worthy of examination here for a few reasons. First, it is interesting to see how themes he introduced in his earlier Westerns are represented in a different, but related, genre. As Laderman notes in *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*, both genres explore a “home/wandering antinomy,” and both Westerns and road movies examine “conflict between nature and culture” and “tension between rebellion and conformity” (35). While it is true, as Laderman suggests, that the “rebellion/conformity duality” theme can be found in many or even most classical genres, it is at the fore in these two genres in particular, and “the road movie's modernist portrayal of rebellion pushes countercinema strategies to the foreground, where the narration along with the narrative challenges typically passive viewer reception,” (35) and it is significant that Peckinpah made films in each, though he was somewhat ironically relatively less inventive, as the genre invited innovation, whilst making his road movies. Second, though similarly, considering his road movies along with others of the time allows us to see the ways in which, despite his reputation and claims he made about himself, Peckinpah was actually a romantic but conservative idealist, and his representations of individuation through rebellion in these films confirms this, and it also positions him as rebelliously and defiantly unique vis-a-vis his contemporaries.

Another reason Peckinpah's road movies are worthy of examination here is that, to varying degrees and for different reasons, they have been mostly overlooked by scholars and those contemporary critics who do not focus exclusively on Peckinpah. Even Laderman, for

example, who defines *The Getaway* in his aforementioned book as a “key outlaw road movie,” never mentions – let alone critically examines – it again in that text's 300 pages. Similarly, there is not a single mention of this film in *The Road Movie Book*, a nearly 400-page collection of essays on the genre that was edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. While *The Getaway*, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, and *Convoy* each have their shortcomings and are not necessarily career-defining works (with, perhaps, the exception of *Garcia*), they were each significant in their own ways, too, and they deserve attention: *Convoy* was a commercial triumph, for example, and Laderman favorably compares *Alfredo Garcia* and *The Getaway* to classic “quest” road movies like *Five Easy Pieces*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point*, and *Badlands* (82).

### ***The Getaway* (1972):**

The principal argument Peckinpah articulates through *The Getaway* (1972) is not a unique one; indeed, it arguably follows Marx's thinking and is, consciously or not, inspired by the work of thinkers affiliated with the Frankfurt School (especially of the postwar period), which was responding to problems created by civilization for the individual and was to some extent popular and influential among certain circles in America in the 1960s. Specifically, *The Getaway* examines how individuals corrupted by capitalism are at once victims and victimizers, as they in turn exploit others in effort to achieve their goals. The romantic couple at the center of this film, Doc (Steve McQueen) and Carol (Ali MacGraw), are, in short, caught up in a cycle of committing crimes as a way to repay Doc's “boss,” Jack Benyon (Ben Johnson), who arranges to have Doc released from prison only after Carol agrees to sleep with Benyon, and the couple

agrees to help with a bank heist he has planned. Benyon, a corrupt businessman, has considerable power and influence, and he uses it to exploit others for financial gain. In order to free themselves from Benyon's control, Doc and Carol must capitulate to Benyon, though their compliance somewhat ironically earns them the money they need to escape to Mexico.

In the film, Benyon is presented as wise, as one who knows the rules of and happily plays the game, i.e. he understands how to use people to get what he wants (money and power), and he is also clearly respected by others with power. As Stephen Prince notes, the corrupt executives (and the henchmen they employ) in Peckinpah's films “visualize Peckinpah's conviction of the lethal nature of corporate America, with its interlocking economic and political interests. Peckinpah viewed modern America as a society where the highest levels of power are wielded by businessmen and politicians with blood on their hands” (38-9). In this way, Benyon represents the society at large and, in particular, its power structure and capitalist mechanisms. He behaves the way one must within such a system to thrive; though we may see him as behaving in ways that are morally reprehensible, he arguably acts smartly with regard to his own self-preservation and thus represents what Adorno calls in the 36<sup>th</sup> section of *Minima Moralia* the “sickness of all individuals” and serves as evidence that “contemporary sickness exists precisely in what is normal” (58-60). If Benyon represents power, Doc and Carol are ostensibly helpless: they must obey regardless of their objections, and there is no one they can appeal to outside of Benyon since the entire society is “sick” and subscribes to the philosophical and economic ideas he represents. Fromm, in *To Have or to Be?*, describes this sickness in stark post-materialist terms by suggesting that “we live in a society that rests on private property, profit, and power as the pillars of its existence. To acquire, to own, and to make a profit are the sacred and unalienable

rights of the individual in the industrial society” (59). Benyon, obviously, represents the *having* mode of being Fromm describes here. On the other hand, Doc and Carol represent the *being* mode, which Fromm describes as the “mode of being [that] has as its prerequisites independence, freedom, and the presence of critical reason,” which are the qualities the couple has and/or seeks. Fromm also explains that being “active” “means to give expression to one's faculties, talents, [and] to the wealth of human gifts with which – though in varying degrees – every human being is endowed. It means to renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego, to be interested, to 'list,' to give” (76). Benyon then, as an antagonistic foil, seeks to stifle Doc's *being* and *becoming*; he aims to oppress Doc, to stop this “expression” and “renewal,” in an effort to protect his own power and his ability *have*. The prison metaphor Fromm uses is doubly useful here as Doc seeks to both escape the literal prison in which he is confined in the film's opening (and to which he would return if Benyon wished) and the figurative prison that is his association with Benyon.

As a brief aside, it is worth noting that Fromm associates language, and names in particular, with the *having* mode. He writes, “The name of a person [...] creates the illusion that he or she is a final, immortal being. The person and the name become equivalent; the name demonstrates that the person is a lasting, indestructible substance—and not a process” (69). “Doc,” of course, is a nickname, not Carter McCoy's given name, and it thus represents or reflects his “process” of becoming, i.e. he is, in Frommian terms, *being* as opposed to being principally concerned with *having* like Benyon is (this is also true of Rubber Duck, Kris Kristofferson's character in Peckinpah's *Convoy*, who mostly goes by his CB handle and not his given name). “Doc,” not coincidentally, is also short for “doctor,” one who selflessly helps and

heals others, and this further highlights the contrast between him (and by extension Carol) and Benyon (and what Benyon represents).

Indeed, the film's title and opening scenes tell us in explicit terms that *The Getaway* will be about the tensions between freedom and captivity, *being* and *having*, individuation and the exploitative effects of capitalism. Of course, this was a favorite theme of Peckinpah's. As Prince notes in *Savage Cinema*, "The narratives of his films tend to be about characters waging a losing gambit against events that are extinguishing the conditions of their lives, and they dramatize processes of diminishment, disillusion, compromise, and defeat" (93). One does not need to "get away," for example, unless they are being oppressed or held captive, and these conditions are precisely what we see at the beginning of the movie: deer are grazing outside of a prison. The walls and fences here establish a stark contrast between the power, authority, and control exercised by the state (whose principal goal is the ostensible safety of its citizens and to protect its own power and not the bestowment of freedom) and the relative autonomy enjoyed by the animals on screen. The prison in particular is a powerful symbol of society's insistence on conformity: follow its rules or be forced to submit your illusory freedom. In prison, the illusion of freedom is revealed to be just that, and within its walls prisoners must fully submit and conform. We are reminded of this through scenes of inmates operating machinery – they become, in effect, rather anonymous, interchangeable parts of these machines – and entering their cells in unison, essentially functioning as a machine. More than anything, this is the central theme of *The Getaway*: the limitations society places on individuals are ultimately dehumanizing, though most are too preoccupied with *having*, as Fromm defines it, to object, i.e. they believe the sacrifices they make in order to belong or fit in are worth the cost. As Fromm

writes in *The Sane Society*, “Many substitutes for a truly individual sense of identity were sought for, and found. Nation, religion, class and occupation serve to furnish a sense of identity” (62). For most, then, what they think is individuation comes through the repression of the will and, ultimately, through submission, though Fromm notes that this “sense of identity [...] is an illusory one” (63). Fromm continues, “In the United States [...] the sense of identity is shifted more and more to the experience of conformity” (62). Peckinpah's manipulation of images and sounds during the opening minutes of *The Getaway* represent this very idea; society grants you the opportunity to conform on your own, but you will be forced to submit if you do not act on this opportunity. Most people choose the former path, as it is the one of least resistance as long as you can repress the desire to *be* (as opposed to *have*).

We learn early in the film that Doc is serving a sentence for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon, crimes society should not and cannot tolerate. In this way, the character is not entirely sympathetic; however, we also learn during his parole hearing that he has been a model prisoner, yet his appeal for early release is denied. His conformity whilst in prison, in other words, does not earn him his freedom – this serves as a metaphor for one's captive state with regard to the restrictions of society – in part because Benyon, the aforementioned corrupt but powerful and respected businessman, wields his influence on the parole board. We will later learn that Benyon is responsible for Doc's fate, and he is holding out until Doc agrees to do business with him. In one of these early scenes, we see Doc playing chess with a fellow inmate. Out of frustration, Doc knocks over the pieces, and his opponent says, “Oh, man, it's just a game.” But, as Michael Bliss argues in *Justified Lives*, it is more than a game to Doc: “chess is a visible reminder of his status as a pawn controlled by Benyon” (202). Benyon's desire to *have*, in



other words, has repercussions on others, notably Doc, and it impinges on others' autonomy and freedom to *be*. Indeed, that is arguably a major theme of *The Getaway*: the cost of freedom is high and is set by those – significantly represented here by a corrupt businessman and various law enforcement officials – who *have* as a result of their oppression or exploitation of others.

After the parole hearing, Peckinpah presents a montage of sounds and images: we see and hear prisoners operating heavy machinery, suggesting the prison itself is both a literal and figurative societal mechanism of control, and Doc has slow-motion flashbacks to love-making sessions with his partner, Carol. David Weddle accurately describes this montage thusly: “the sequence jumped back and forth in time in a breathless rush of images” (439). He adds, “The soundtrack too was a montage of elements—the voices of guards urging the prisoners to work harder, the teletype pounding of the textile machines—synched not literally to the images on the screen, but to the inner reality of Doc McCoy as he reached his breaking point” (439). The scenes of prison work are, as Weddle notes, intercut with those of love-making and Doc's memory with increasing rapidity and, likewise, the sounds become more and more intense and do not always match up with the images we are shown, and all of this reflects Doc's building frustration and schizophrenia until he finally snaps, experiencing a traumatic dissociative break: he crushes an intricate model bridge he has been working on in his cell. This act signifies his realization that working within the system, i.e. following the prison's rules, will not earn him his freedom; the bridge, while representing industrial and thus societal achievement, invokes ideas about the road; Doc realizes that his freedom resides elsewhere, and he will have to leave the familiarity and comfort of the known if he is to *be*. That is, Doc must leave behind the corrupt

political/economic structure that only served to rob him of his autonomy, an act that requires both literal and figurative “travel.”

After Doc's psychotic break, he is visited in jail by Carol, and he tells her that he cannot handle being imprisoned anymore. He orders Carol to tell Benyon that he (Doc) is “for sale” at Benyon's “price.” Doc's desperation is clear, though he has no way to know exactly what Benyon's price will be. Carol does what she is told, though the viewer is not privy to the details behind her deal with Benyon, and Doc is quickly released from prison because of Benyon's influence over the parole board. Carol picks up Doc outside of the prison's menacing walls, arriving late because of a salon appointment, and asks if he wants to drive. This seemingly simple gesture is, in fact, significant: like Doc's model bridge, their car makes clear that the couple is about to go on a journey of self-discovery and individuation (in this film and in many road movies, unlike in Peckinpah's *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* and other Westerns, cars represent a way towards freedom if not a form of freedom itself). What is more, Carol is offering to relinquish control to Doc. Doc, however, jokes that his license is expired. Though he says this with a smile, Doc is expressing a serious idea: he cannot enjoy the privilege granted to some by society to travel, explore, discover, and escape, i.e. he is still being controlled though he is ostensibly free. This control affects Doc in profound ways: though he knows what he would like to leave behind (the prison and what it represents with regard to society's control), he is not sure to where he might escape and, even if he was, he is not fully free to do so. Further, as we will see later in the film, the price of his freedom – what Carol had to give Benyon – is unconscionable.

As the old Republican cliché goes, freedom is not free, but the price for Doc and Carol is considerable. Doc must agree to do Benyon's bidding, essentially becoming the latter's slave, and

is in effect dehumanized, as this exploitative relationship further robs Doc of his autonomy. We all experience this to some degree in our everyday lives, of course, but by making Doc's situation so extreme, Peckinpah is able to make perfectly clear the effects of exploitative labor conditions or relationships. Further, as we eventually learn, Carol had to agree to have sex with Benyon in order to secure Doc's release. Arguably, this is a form of rape – at the very least, it is a clear abuse of power – and Carol is objectified in the process. Soon after his release, Doc asks Carol directly if she had been with any other men in the years he had been locked up, and she replies somewhat cryptically, perhaps realizing the truth would devastate him since he is partly responsible for her submitting to Benyon, saying, “I'm still here, Doc!” Regardless, the couple has sex, though they both admit to being nervous. This anxiety, perhaps even uncertainty, mirrors the destabilization Doc is feeling as a newly “free” man: where will he go and what will he do? What, precisely, is Benyon's price? How can he establish a relatively safe and normal life for himself and Carol? Additionally, the notion of risk is raised via their admission: when one is uncertain or nervous, the stakes somehow seem higher. This feeling mirrors the experience of hitting the road, and it serves as foreshadowing (when the couple eventually crosses the border into a “wild” yet somehow more hospitable Mexico), as travel is often an improvisational act. According to biographer Garner Simmons, Peckinpah's director of photography Lucien Ballard claimed McQueen thought Doc should rape Carol after being released from prison. Ballard reported that McQueen's argument went like this: “This guy's been in prison for five years, and he just comes home and really takes what he feels is rightfully his. [McQueen] couldn't understand what Sam wanted him to do. He thought it was phony. But Sam insisted and again it played perfectly” (161). *The Getaway*, and specifically the dynamic between the two

protagonists, would have been remarkably different had McQueen won this fight; the couple's first love scene is crucial in terms of establishing both Doc's vulnerability and, ultimately, his moral superiority. In other words, it is in no small part responsible for us seeing Doc as a sympathetic character who must flee the crushing weight of the society and its corrupt figures around him.

The next day, when Doc meets with Benyon, the latter makes clear the dynamics of their relationship when he explains he wants Doc to manage a bank heist operation. Benyon says, "You run the job, but I run the show." In this way, Doc has simply traded one form of imprisonment for another, and he sees that his newly found freedom is an illusion. Benyon, who others see as upstanding, is corrupt and wields great power. There is no one to whom Doc can appeal. In effect, Benyon is the law. Benyon here reflects the diseased society, from which there is no easy escape.

In order to pull off the job Benyon has planned, vehicles are key, and no fewer than three of them are involved: a van that Carol drives and the floor of which serves as a door through which Doc can covertly enter the sewer (where he will cut the bank's power lines), a hay truck stashed outside of town that will serve as a getaway vehicle, and another car in which Benyon's hired goons (and Doc's unfortunate accomplices) arrive. The vehicles in this film, while symbolic of maneuverability and escape, also serve as tools, just as Benyon is using Doc as a tool, and the real "getaway" begins after the robbery sloppily concludes and one of Benyon's henchmen reveals his plan to kill Doc and take the money. In self-defense, Doc shoots the man and mistakenly leaves him for dead.

At this point in the film, Doc and Carol are not only fleeing from Benyon but from the cops, and in this way Benyon is conflated with the society's "official" authority, and Benyon's transgressions (e.g. organizing the heist) are granted tacit approval by this authority as they come to share a common enemy in the team of Doc and Carol. The outlaws, Doc and Carol, are individuals who refuse to submit to this authority, whether it is just and ethical or not. In an attempt to present the illusion of conformity, Doc and Carol swap their getaway car for a station wagon, perhaps the ultimate symbol – aside from a house – of domesticity, and this vehicle allows them to easily pass through a police check point, i.e. the station wagon allows Doc and Carol to present themselves as non-threats, as having "bought in."

On their way to Benyon's office, Carol realizes their haul is \$250,000 light. Upon arriving, Doc begins to settle up with his boss when Carol sneaks up behind Doc with a gun, and it appears as though she worked out a deal with Benyon to kill Doc once the heist was complete, but she ultimately shoots Benyon instead. Doc, now suspicious of Carol and her motivations, engages her in a short standoff, but they soon enough hit the road again. Doc, who was confused from the start, is now even more alienated: the only person he believed he could trust is now in question, and his frustrations erupt when he pulls over the car to slap Carol around. Feeling betrayed, he says, "Stupid. Why didn't you tell me?" Carol responds, "You sent me to him, you know?" Carol's reluctance or inability to explain herself, and thus allowing the cloud of confusion to linger if not grow, further exacerbates Doc's angst and alienation – again, the one person he could trust has been corrupted by Benyon (a representation of society and its economic structure) and his money. Benyon's surviving thug, meanwhile, is in pursuit of Doc and Carol

and kidnaps a veterinarian and his wife, who he brings along with him (in their car, which he commandeers).

Doc and Carol continue to struggle to trust one another after fleeing Benyon's office with the money, and at one point Doc suggests they split up for good. At this time, with their fate as a couple undetermined, they plan to trade in their current vehicle – the loss of the station wagon suggests, if temporarily, that the illusion of domesticity and conformity has been shattered. Not coincidentally, it is during this same time that it becomes clear to Doc that Carol did, in fact, sleep with Benyon, something she was doing her best to not explicitly acknowledge. Her infidelity, though not really her fault, is interpreted by Doc as a betrayal, as a denial of his dream of a happy, “normal” life with his partner (again, this is emphasized through the loss of the symbolic station wagon). To further underscore this, Peckinpah has Carol do nearly all of the driving during this stage of their getaway, an ostensible reversal of traditional gender roles; however, it is not uncommon in heist movies for women to do the driving, as it is typically the men who must rapidly exit and re-enter vehicles while performing “jobs.” Indeed, after Doc and Carol have a shootout with police and eventually get a new car to replace their old one – interestingly, cars are not only tools in this film, but they are also treated as disposable commodities that are easily ditched and replaced – Carol continues to do the driving, but Doc, like Benyon previously, is giving all of the orders, i.e. “directions.” This reveals yet another dimension to the film: the way in which men dominate women.

Eventually, Carol acquires yet another vehicle, and she and Doc decide to head to Mexico, which is implicitly presented as an alternative to the exploitative realities they have experienced in America. Mexico, as it does in many of Peckinpah's films, represents existential

or spiritual freedom from corrupt American businessmen and law enforcement officials (and what they represent). Mexico's relative lawlessness, as opposed to being anarchic, allows the individual to be free and expressive in the Frommian sense, to focus on *being* instead of *having*, as there is a relative absence of rigidity with regard to oppressive institutions and the regulations they impose on individuals. This, too, reveals Peckinpah's decidedly libertarian values. Mexico is seen here as a pastoral paradise where one – or, in this case, a couple that is seeking to repair a relationship – can (re)define him- or herself freely and without unsought influence or manipulation.

Appropriately, Doc and Carol intensify their effort after they are nearly crushed to death by a garbage truck that had picked up and emptied a dumpster in which they were hiding. While the metaphor here is a bit heavy-handed, it effectively conveys Peckinpah's point: Doc and Carol, because of their refusal and rebellion, are seen by society as “trash” that must be disposed of. The dump into which Doc and Carol are eventually deposited is, in effect, the same as the prison where Doc was held to keep him away from society.

After a shootout in a hotel with Benyon's men, Doc and Carol flee, and they commandeer a truck being driven by a redneck (Slim Pickens). They ask the accommodating and affable cowboy to take them to Mexico, their imagined paradise, and once they cross the border, Doc and Carol generously give the man \$30,000 for his truck and his troubles after he reveals he earned just \$5,000 the previous year. This scene confirms the essentially morally conservative nature of Peckinpah's film: though Doc and Carol fight against the law, that law (and everything it represents with regard to safety and society) is hopelessly corrupt. For Doc and Carol to be truly free, and for them to be able to create a life together, they must escape. While there is no

doubt about the couple's criminal status, both Doc and Carol are portrayed as generous, with regard to their monetary gift to the cowboy, and as acting justly, doing what is necessary to combat the oppressive forces at work against them (and, notably, Doc only kills when it is absolutely necessary). As Dukore argues, Doc's decision to capitulate and carry out Benyon's heist is layered, but it ultimately reflects Doc's moral superiority. His "crime" has a Robin Hood quality to it, on the one hand, as banks (as institutions) are symbols of the corrupt society, but, Dukore writes, Doc is also morally obligated to do the job as a form of repayment: Doc decides "to retire from his profession the way Bishop of *The Wild Bunch* hopes to, after making one big score. In Doc's case the robbery is more necessary than in Bishop's, since in addition to giving him the wherewithal to leave his life of crime, it is payback to the man responsible for getting him out of jail" (42). Further, Doc and Carol are praised by the cowboy who drives them into Mexico, an implicit affirmation from or endorsement by a hard-working and morally upright character, and we are meant to believe the couple will fly right and perhaps even start a family now that they have won their freedom to *be* – notably, in a land that, at least as it's represented in Peckinpah's film, has not yet been corrupted by industrialization, neoliberal economic policies, and so on – after fleeing through "a labyrinth of malevolent machinery," which includes "banks of television monitors, surveillance cameras, automated prison gates, hammering textile machines, and carnivorous garbage trucks" (Weddle 440). As Neil Fulwood notes, Peckinpah in this film comments on one of his favorite themes: "men out of time – the onset (or onslaught) of modernity. In this respect, *The Getaway* is definitely a western brought into the second half of the twentieth century" (92). At the film's conclusion, the cowboy heads back to America on foot while the couple drives south on an open Mexican road – Adam and Eve returning to The



Garden – which clearly represents freedom, purity, and opportunity, i.e. the open road is a blank slate, and it suggests the couple will be able to honestly express their identities and experience individuation without having to make compromises with or otherwise conform to a restrictive, oppressive, corrupt, and violent society.

As Simmons suggests, *The Getaway*, which we might categorize in the “bandit-gangster subgenre,” is remarkable in a few ways. First, it mostly follows generic conventions in that the film “involves a bandit couple (a man and a woman) who clearly adhere to a traditional Western set of values. They are associated with the rural while they carry out raids against urban society (usually banks). Because society no longer understands the meaning of the traditional code, it hunts the couple down, considering them to be gangsters” (Simmons 156) or, more specifically, an existential threat. But, as Simmons also notes, “the bandit-gangster couple [is] generally [...] killed at the end of the film [because] they have no place in modern society” (156). Doc and Carol, however, survive and “escape to Mexico, a place more suited to traditional Western values” (Simmons 156). Or, as Stephen Prince writes in *Savage Cinema*, the film “with its plot-driven characters offers a sense of regeneration and deliverance through [necessary] violence as Doc and Carol manage to patch up their marriage and escape to Mexico” (226). Doc and Carol, then, ultimately represent “traditional Western values,” and their marriage is what they were fighting to protect all along from outside threats, e.g. when Benyon forces Carol to be unfaithful and Benyon's emasculation of Doc by essentially owning him. Unlike many road movies that were produced around the same time, the family unit, threatened by the corrupt forces of society, is what is celebrated by Peckinpah in this film, and the theme is underscored by the cowboy character who says to Doc and Carol after learning they are married, “That's the

trouble with this world: there's no dang morals. Kids figure if they ain't living together [without being wed], they ain't living." As Bliss notes in *Justified Lives*, "Occasionally, Peckinpah will even go so far as to insert into his films special figures who act as redeemers for the protagonists. Certainly, *The Getaway's* Cowboy, who rescues Doc and Carol from the miasma of murder and deceit in which they have become involved, qualifies in this respect" (14). The cowboy, in other words, tells us through his approval of Doc and Carol that they were morally justified to do what they did and that their cause was worthy.

***Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974):**

Like *The Getaway*, which was released only a couple of years earlier, Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* is a work of social critique aimed specifically at the relationship between power, money, and corruption (in both the economic sense and with regard to the "corruption" of man's psyche, autonomy, and his ability to *be*), and it features cars and travel as metaphors. The two films are similar in yet another way: while Bennie (Warren Oates), *Alfredo Garcia's* protagonist, does not survive to succeed in his quest, it is because he lacks – or, more precisely loses – what Doc and Carol have, i.e. a traditional familial bond. Both films, then, celebrate conservative notions of romance and love, and Bennie is gunned down at the conclusion of *Alfredo Garcia* precisely because he comes to embody everything the villains in the film are and he is supposed to oppose: bloodlust, greed, and so forth; that is, he becomes antisocial in the traditional sense whereas Doc and Carol must battle certain societal representatives and institutions because those people and institutions are corrupt and make "healthy" relationships, etc. impossible. In this way, being two sides of the same coin, both *The*

*Getaway* and *Alfredo Garcia* might be seen as critiques of '70s-era politics: if corporations and businessmen exploit workers, for example, and the American government, which is supposed to protect our interests, is sending drafted troops to kill and die in Vietnam, how could an honest, hardworking person hope to survive, either psychologically or even literally? These films, like many others of the time, interrogated the actual functions of power in this country, and they examined the alienating effects of power's practices: how does one behave morally or ethically (and what do those terms even mean anymore?) in the shadow of the Kent State Massacre, Vietnam, Watergate, and numerous political assassinations? Bennie, in *Alfredo Garcia*, is an example of what can happen when one loses the desire or does not have the ability to answer such a question.

In his book *Justified Lives*, Michael Bliss claims that Bennie is “delivered from corruption” through violence, though he pays the ultimate price for his freedom (13). I, however, would argue that Bennie never earns his freedom unless we are willing to take the view that death is a desirable form of liberation; instead, Bennie is served with justice for the moral crimes he commits through the course of *Alfredo Garcia*. Regardless, what is clear is that violence – both literal and symbolic – is at the heart of this film. Because Peckinpah got his start in Westerns, it is not surprising that the function and meaning of violence in his road movies is similar to the function and meaning of violence in his (and others') Westerns. As James Kendrick notes in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, “In the traditional or classic western [...], violence is the chief means by which good and evil are distinguished. While the old adage suggests that the white hat denotes 'good' and the black hat denotes 'evil', the principal factor in distinguishing between the two is arguably *restraint*, particularly in the use of violence” (72). Of

course, this convention was challenged and subverted in many Westerns beginning in the 1960s and '70s, but it held and holds true as a rule of thumb, and, as Kendrick suggests, this distinction establishes a Western's villain as a “figure of excess” who deploys “violence to satisfy his own desires” (72-3). While a “hero” might occasionally slip up in a moment of rage, what is notable about Bennie in *Alfredo Garcia* is how completely he, as a result of a psychic break (the murder of his girlfriend, which represents the impossibility of him realizing the familial dream), loses all control and becomes incapable of exercising restraint in the use of violence. In turn, he becomes as villainous, and as much of threat to Peckinpah's romanticized utopian society of familial love, as the film's antagonists: El Jefe (Emilio Fernández), the man who has put a bounty on Alfredo Garcia's head after the latter impregnates El Jefe's daughter; Quill (Gig Young) and Sappensly (Robert Webber), El Jefe's professional goons, who attempt to get Bennie to do their dirty work; and the bikers who nearly rape Bennie's girlfriend, Elita (Isela Vega).

In *If They Move ... Kill 'Em!*, David Weddle, quoting Paul Seydor, correctly identifies the theme of not only this film but many of Peckinpah's other works: all of the money in the world is not worth the cost of one's soul. As Weddle notes, “This would be the dominating theme of *The Wild Bunch*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* as well – a point missed by many reviewers who labeled Peckinpah a nihilist” (204). Indeed, it is Bennie's desire to *have* – that is, to claim the bounty El Jefe has placed on Garcia's head – that literally prohibits him from *being*, as both he and his romantic interest are exterminated in the process, and Bennie's death is the necessary result of his shortcomings. But Peckinpah presents Bennie as a relatively sympathetic figure, as he, like Doc in *The Getaway*, is battling forces that are fundamentally evil and supremely powerful. Even if Bennie loses his way, he is only partly to

blame, as the proverbial deck is stacked against him and life has dealt him a particularly bad hand.

The opening shot of *Alfredo Garcia* is vintage Peckinpah: a black and white still image (in some ways reminiscent of the opening of *Straw Dogs*) of some ducks freely floating in the water (and the animals here evoke the opening of *The Getaway*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, and *The Wild Bunch*, and they serve to establish the juxtaposition between “free” animals and the control exercised over would-be free humans by corrupt and exploitative agents of power who are motivated by money). This shot is next unfrozen and transitions to color, suggesting birth as the world of *Alfredo Garcia* comes to life. This notion of birth – and, by extension, its inevitable conclusion in death – is further emphasized as the next figure we see is that of a pregnant woman, El Jefe's daughter, who is lying on the shore. Quickly, another woman and two men approach the pregnant woman and say that her father wants to see her immediately. Like *The Getaway*, the initial pastoral images are abruptly and somewhat violently replaced by ones that introduce the presence of power, domination, and order, i.e. “civilizing” elements. Further, as the pregnant woman is escorted into El Jefe's chambers, heavy doors clank closed behind her – these doors are reminiscent of the prison gates from *The Getaway* and represent captivity and control, the loss of autonomy and the freedom to *be*.

An angry El Jefe demands to know who the baby's father is, but the woman will not tell him; she behaves defiantly, refusing to respect El Jefe's power, and his goons rip the top of her dress, a threat of further violence. Still, the woman is silent. Further infuriated by this insubordination and disobedience, El Jefe orders his goons to break the woman's arm, which they do, and she finally gives El Jefe what he is after: a man named Alfredo Garcia is the one who

impregnated her. With confidence and authority reminiscent of Benyon in *The Getaway*, El Jefe puts a \$1,000,000 bounty on Garcia's head. This act sets the film's action into motion, and we see a convoy of vehicles leaving El Jefe's Mexican compound, and these shots are intercut with ones of an airplane flying and then landing, and we then see El Jefe's goons checking into hotels and, essentially, beginning their search for Garcia. Two of these henchmen, Quill and Sappensly, who are American, enter a seedy bar where Bennie, a drunkard, works as a piano player and singer. In a clever bit of characterization, Bennie is wearing sunglasses (even though it is nighttime and he is indoors), suggesting he is blind to reality. In other words, he does not understand that violence begets violence and is a force that corrupts man's soul and his ability to live harmoniously with others: Bennie's violent acts will eventually lead to Elita's murder and his own death. Further, Garcia is being pursued for what someone of a puritanical bent would dub sexual transgressions, i.e. he had sex out of wedlock. In this way, while he is not a major character in the film with regard to screen time, he represents the wild and the free, the force of nature that needs to be tamed by man. Bennie, too, is a kind of outlaw, and his job and lifestyle are antithetical to conservative societal conventions; when he begins wantonly killing others, he seals his own fate: for the sake of society he must be stamped out.

Bennie tells Quill and Sappensly that he knows Garcia and that he will bring him in alive; the goons, however, insist that bringing in Garcia dead is fine, as they know all they need is his head. Significantly, the henchmen do not tell Bennie just how significant El Jefe's reward is; as far as Bennie is concerned, he is entitled to a small pittance for his help. Also worth noting here is the piece of foreshadowing provided by Peckinpah. As Michael Bliss observes in *Justified Lives*, “[T]he sound of squealing tires is heard when Sappensly first shows Alfredo's picture to

Bennie” [and the] “connection between the pursuit of the head and death by automobile [is made] obvious” (257). At this juncture, Bennie has no way to know where his journey will take him or what the price will be for his actions, but ultimately he does not care: the money is all he wants, and all of his decisions from this point forward are made with the reward in mind.

After Bennie leaves the bar, he tracks down Elita, a woman with whom both Bennie and Garcia are/were sleeping (as a prostitute, she is another representative of deviance), and she tells Bennie that Garcia recently died in a car wreck. Bennie visits Quill and Sappensly to tell them he knows how to find Garcia, though he does not mention the man is already dead. Exercising their power, the men demand to take Bennie's photo for which he must remove his glasses (to underscore the significance of this, it is worth noting that Bennie even sleeps with his glasses on, only removing them for sex), which again represents his free, abnormal, outsider status. It is a small act, but it is the first in a series that aim to civilize or tame him, and much of this film is really about how he reacts to the increasing challenges presented to and demands placed on him. The goons say they will give Bennie \$1,000 for accurate information on Garcia's whereabouts, a figure that represents just 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of what they stand to earn, but Bennie counters by demanding \$10,000, which he cannot know is still a relatively small amount (one percent of the total bounty). Quill and Sappensly, with their suits and exclusive knowledge, wield great power over Bennie and use it to exploit him, especially with regard to his time and labor, just as Benyon does with Doc in *The Getaway*. As Stephen Prince notes in *Savage Cinema*, “Benny's quest to find and mutilate Alfredo's corpse forms Peckinpah's most extreme statement on the corrupting influence of money. Peckinpah described the theme of this film as a grim one, the darkness of which was intended to strike a cautionary moral tone” (145). It is fitting that this “statement” is

made in this particular genre and at this particular time in history: the presence of the road in this film ultimately suggests that we cannot run – or, more appropriately, drive – away from our responsibilities and we will, or should, be held accountable for our actions, i.e. Bennie is corrupted by money and must pay the price. Bennie is not presented as a hero and he is not entirely sympathetic as a character; he seems desperate and confused, though in his defense, he is being manipulated by men who are much more powerful and intelligent than he is, a dynamic familiar to many viewers who are exploited by their bosses, for example, or lied to by elected officials. Like Doc, Bennie is but a pawn, and his actions reflect his frustration regarding his condition, but he does not have a clear vision of an alternative mode of being.

To further emphasize Bennie's level of debauchment, Peckinpah shows him and Elita in bed the next morning: Bennie pours liquor onto his crotch to kill the crabs she has given him. This act illustrates not only Elita's promiscuity but also, and more important, Bennie's inability or unwillingness to exercise good judgement. All of this, though, can be forgiven – with regard to the moral laws Peckinpah establishes – because the two have genuine affection for one another. Once on the road in search of Garcia, for example, the two act as a unit – again, we have a parallel with *The Getaway* – and even agree to be married. This act affirms the significance of the family unit in Peckinpah's world, a rather stark deviation from other road movies of the era in which individuality and self-reliance were represented as supreme qualities. Somewhat ironically, and perhaps even disingenuously, Bennie tells Elita, “Hell, I've never been any place I want to go back to, that's for damn sure.” While commitment and marriage would surely be a step in a new direction for this character, it is also a sort of selfless sacrifice: the stability a marriage would provide, for example, comes at a price in terms of one's freedom. Regardless,



this idea of, as Bennie says, “go[ing] someplace new” is at home in this genre, as road movies typically celebrate movement, which the road facilitates, and reject stagnation or what is behind (in the rearview mirror). Bennie's flaw, though, is that he does not see movement in terms of forward and reverse: he tells Elita, “This time I'm moving up.” Significantly, the word “up” here invokes the idea of ascending to power, as in climbing the corporate ladder. And, as we see later in the film, this is precisely what Bennie tries to do, and it is ultimately the cause of his undoing; when he adopts the ruthlessness of Quill and Sappensly, the suits higher “up” who manipulate and exploit Bennie, he meets his end. It is Bennie's desire to *have*, in other words, and his loss of compassion and empathy that guarantees he will fail.

While Bennie's car and the road on which it travels represent the way to a new life, which he plans to fund with his \$10,000 reward, there are plenty of obstacles along the way. First, Quill and Sappensly (and some of their hired goons) are following the couple, waiting to cut out Bennie once he leads them to Garcia. Additionally, the inconvenience of a flat tire early on in their journey to find Garcia suggests their quest will not be a smooth one. The most significant difficulty they encounter, however, is a pair of bikers who appear at the couple's rural campsite one evening.

[A brief but worthwhile detour: Peckinpah cast “outlaw” country artist Kris Kristofferson and Kristofferson's keyboardist, Donnie Fritts, to play these menacing bikers. Their motorcycles, as miniature steel horses evocative of the villains' mounts in Westerns, represent real danger and rebellion (they make cars seem domestic and safe by comparison), and the bikers' long hair and beards help to establish them as genuinely anti-establishment and thus unpredictable and

unintelligible. Significantly, as Michael Streissguth notes in *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville*,

Kristofferson's songs [...] explored sensual love and desperate negotiations with personal devils in a rambling ballad style that sharply contrasted with the strictly tempered verse that had dominated country music for decades. He engendered a freedom of expression in Nashville's music business, and, in his wake, other freedoms emerged. (2)

Kristofferson as a musician and actor, then, brings something to this biker character that others would not, namely a past and spirit of rebellion. Kristofferson would have a respectable film career of his own, of course, and he appears in three of Peckinpah's films, but this is arguably his most sinister role, the one that most clearly, if exaggerated, reflected the man's real rebelliousness. To further illustrate Kristofferson's cultural significance, it is worth noting that Martin Scorsese included a reference to him in his film *Taxi Driver* (1976). In one scene, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) tells Travis Bickel (Robert De Niro) that he is a paradox, citing Kristofferson's song "The Pilgrim—Chapter 33": "He's a prophet and a pusher. Partly truth, partly fiction. A walking contradiction." While these lines do apply to Bickel, they more accurately describe nearly all of Peckinpah's protagonists, and it makes sense that the director would identify and seek an association with Kristofferson.]

The bikers' presence is immediately unnerving, and Bennie and Elita are clearly uncomfortable. Bennie introduces Elita as his wife, perhaps thinking that the bikers will have mercy on her or see her as "belonging" to Bennie, but of course the bikers are transgressors; the institution of marriage, along with all institutions, is meaningless (let alone sacred).

Kristofferson's character, Paco, touches Elita's hair and, despite Bennie's attempt at an objection, he leads her away with the help of his partner, who holds a gun on Bennie. Paco cuts off Elita's top with a switchblade and appears to be preparing to rape her, but she slaps him repeatedly (which is more than Bennie did in her defense). Dejected, Paco walks silently over to a rock and sits down; she goes over to him, kneels, he touches her hair again, and she moves in to kiss him. Elita appears to be offering herself to Paco here, perhaps in an attempt to secure her safety and release. This is reminiscent of both Amy in *Straw Dogs* and Carol in *The Getaway*. Meanwhile, Bennie knocks out the second biker with a frying pan, takes his gun, and kills Paco, but not before he sees Paco and Elita embracing. In *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*, Garner Simmons notes that Elita is the most powerful character in this scene and argues that she does not need Bennie to save her. He writes, "When Paco strips her to the waist, she makes it very clear that he will never be able to dominate her, slapping his face twice. When he slaps her back, she defiantly takes it without tears, thereby destroying the masculine fantasy that he can sexually overpower her" (198). Further, when Elita turns the tables on Paco and makes advances of her own, she is doing so in an effort to essentially distract him from going after Bennie. As Simmons also notes, Elita has resolved her dilemma without Bennie's help, seeming to make "his rescue effort superfluous. [But] it makes Peckinpah's point: in killing Paco and his partner, Bennie is not rescuing Elita but *himself*" (198). Bennie's priority, in other words, is the \$10,000 he is after and not the woman to whom, only hours earlier, he promised to be married. Elita's near-rape is a warning to Bennie, one he fails to heed. As Neil Fulwood writes in *The Films of Sam Peckinpah*, "Like Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, stricken with guilt even before he commits his crime, Bennie finds there is a price to be paid just for entertaining the notion of

wrongdoing, let alone carrying it out” (103). Prior to his encounter with the bikers, Bennie has not yet killed anyone or found Garcia's head; if he wanted to turn back at this juncture, he could. His refusal to consider the danger he is subjecting himself and Elita to, however, which could not have been made more clear than it was during their encounter with the bikers, demonstrates how narrow his focus is: the money (*having*) is everything.

Back in the car, Elita is worried about desecrating Garcia's grave and, generally, seems to be having second thoughts about her arrangement with Bennie; though he ultimately saved her from Paco, or at least appeared to, his masculinity has been challenged and he experiences increasing a-morality with regard to what he is willing to do to earn the \$10,000 bounty, and this makes him appear to be unfit as a potential husband. Bennie, however, is insistent, and Elita says she will take him to the cemetery but will leave him after that. Her encounter with the bikers, and Bennie's behavior in that context, has clearly rattled and changed her. In other words, while both Doc in *The Getaway* and Bennie here depend on their significant others to help them confront their capitalistic antagonists, Bennie acts relatively tentatively and cowardly. Even though Elita later appears to have a change of heart, when Bennie tells her he loves her after finding her crying in the shower, his character flaws will prove to be literally fatal. In *Savage Cinema*, Stephen Prince, who labels *Alfredo Garcia* “a bleakly compelling work” (197), makes an interestingly observation about the way this shower scene is shot. He writes, Peckinpah films Bennie's declaration of love “with a wide-angle lens that distorts Bennie's face. The shot is, furthermore, a subjective composition representing Elita's view of Benny” (148). Prince continues, “Peckinpah was consistent in his method of presentation [as Venner is shot in a similar way when he is raping Amy in *Straw Dogs*]. The subjective imagery emphasizes the

woman's perspective on this male condition. The iconography visualizes these deformations of male psychology and emotion” (148). In short, both Amy and Elita are able to see these men for the monsters they are: as villains who attempt to destroy or negate the beauty of these women (149).

When the couple arrives in the village where Garcia is buried, Elita lies to Bennie and tells him, after asking the locals, that Garcia is not there. Her act, while fundamentally deceptive, is one that is intended to protect their union: while she is opposed to digging up Garcia's corpse, more importantly she knows Bennie is not up to the task of claiming his reward since Quill and Sappensly are on their trail and represent a challenge Bennie has not demonstrated he can overcome. Bennie, however, orders Elita to take him to the cemetery where, incidentally, a funeral for a small child is taking place. The dead child here arguably represents the death of the couple's future: they will never be a proper couple and will never have children of their own, as Bennie, unlike Doc, does not have the ability to be a true partner.

The next day, however, Bennie grabs his machete and heads back to the cemetery. Elita follows and, naturally, is disturbed by the mania exhibited by Bennie when he finds Garcia's grave and begins digging frantically. This unbecoming disrespect is too much for Elita to handle, and she walks away. Just as Bennie is about to decapitate Garcia's corpse, he is hit in the head with and knocked out by a shovel wielded by someone off screen. When Bennie regains consciousness, he is half-buried in the grave – Elita's dead body is there with him but Garcia's head is not. Once again, Bennie's incompetent behavior has resulted in disaster; however, this episode inspires a radical shift in his psychological state, and he yells at Elita's corpse, nonsensically accusing her of wanting and choosing to stay with Garcia, her former lover. In an

ultimate act of betrayal and failure, Bennie unceremoniously leaves Elita's body there; his commitment to her, it seems, was always disingenuous.

At this point in the film, with Elita now out of his way, Bennie's preoccupation with his reward money becomes all-consuming. He hits the road, determined to find Garcia's head, and says to himself, I know they are “up there.” Of course, he means that he is certain the men who have his prize are ahead of him on the road, but his use of the word “up” once again foreshadows his inevitable fall: in his attempt to climb the economic ladder by disposing of those who exist on its higher rungs, he will be knocked entirely off. His adoption of the ruthless, exploitative behavior of those figures who represent wealth and power is an affront to the version of morality Peckinpah champions in this and other films. First, though, Bennie finds the men who have Garcia's head as they are stopped because of a damaged tire, and Bennie kills the men during a shoot-out and retrieves Garcia's head, which is in a fly-covered sack. Again demonstrating his lack of regard for the dead, Bennie violently throws the head into the car. Further, his ignorance and indifference with regard to Garcia's supposed crime is demonstrated when Bennie asks the head, “What's so special about you, anyway?”

During a tense confrontation between Bennie and some villagers who are offended by the grave robbery, Quill and Sappensly, who have been following Bennie, arrive; Quill, who uses an assault weapon to execute everyone but Bennie and an elderly villager, is shot and killed in the skirmish. The obsessed Bennie, however, unsympathetically asks Sappensly, “Do I get paid?” Offended, Sappensly pulls out a gun but is killed by Bennie, who retrieves Garcia's head and steals the goons' yellow station wagon. Bennie, who converses with the head, has clearly become psychotic: he mutters incoherently, talks to a photo of Elita, and has lost any ability he once

might have had to prioritize or discern right from wrong. After confronting Max, Quill and Sappensly's former boss, demanding to know how much the head is really worth and why it is wanted, he kills Max and everyone in the room, takes his promised \$10,000, and leaves with Garcia's head. With nothing left to lose and greed and anger motivating all of his increasingly irrational actions, Bennie is determined to go straight to El Jefe.

When Bennie arrives at El Jefe's compound, a baptism is taking place. Contrasting the dead baby from earlier in the film, this newborn is a mockery of not only Bennie's failure to protect Elita and inability to ensure their future together, but it also represents potential, of which Bennie has none. He kills senselessly, neither honoring the beauty of life nor respecting the finality of death. The baby here is innocent and pure; Bennie, on the other hand, has been totally corrupted in his pursuit of the \$10,000. El Jefe, by comparison, has apparently gotten over his initial anger. When Bennie approaches him with Garcia's head, El Jefe, who is gushing over his new grandson, says, "Take [the money] and go. I have everything that I want. I have my grandson." Money, it is suggested here, has relatively little value when compared to human life, a fact that Bennie could not and cannot recognize. After opening the case containing the full reward, Bennie fully snaps. He says, "Sixteen people are dead because of [Garcia]." This, of course, is not entirely true, as Garcia himself did not kill anyone; his "crime" was fathering the baby that is now making El Jefe so happy. It is far more accurate to say that sixteen people are dead because of Bennie, who at this moment begins shooting everyone in El Jefe's compound, senselessly making a tragic situation even more so. Bennie kills everyone inside except for El Jefe's daughter (and her new son), who rejoices in the death of her domineering father. In fact, she ordered Bennie to kill El Jefe, whose death is a form of liberation for her, and this is

arguably Bennie's only, at least relatively speaking, decent act. However, he has already caused too much pain and has transgressed beyond the point of redemption. As Bennie leaves with the \$1,000,000 and Garcia's head, he notably leaves behind the basket in which he had been carrying the head. This basket was the one Elita brought to her picnic with Bennie when the bikers attacked them. Leaving this item behind is a symbolic act that represents once again the insincerity of Bennie's commitment to Elita, and he is gunned down by El Jefe's guards as he attempts to drive out of the compound (some critics have suggested this is a nod to *Bonnie and Clyde*, a film that influenced Peckinpah), paying the ultimate price for his failures. In *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*, Simmons notes, "The [film's] original script had Bennie winning the [climactic] shoot-out and getting away with the million dollar reward. Earlier that week, Peckinpah had come to the realization that Bennie had to die if he took the money" (205). Garner Simmons, in "The Deadly Companions Revisited" from *Peckinpah Today*, makes a similar point: in "*Alfredo Garcia*, the personal and emotional price that Bennie must pay for delivering the severed head leaves him with nowhere to go. It is no surprise that Peckinpah would end the [...] film with Bennie's death, essentially an existential choice" (21). In other words, because Bennie does not complete the process of individuation – that is, he never graduates from the desire to *have* to the ability to *be* – he is revealed to be a villain and must cease to be. Some critics, such as Bernard Dukore, have argued that Bennie appears to choose this fate, i.e. his execution and death, as a way to atone for his transgressions. In *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films* Dukore writes, "‘Come on, Al, we're going home,' [Bennie] tells the decapitated head as he takes it and the money. He is indeed going home, but the home to which he leaves has a location he does not fully comprehend. It is to Garcia's home, death" (51). While Bennie may not "fully comprehend"



his destination, the ambiguity in this line leaves open the possibility that his conscience does not allow him to go on living as if he had not committed the various atrocities for which he is guilty. Regardless, what is clear is that in the world Peckinpah creates in his road movies, success and individuation are linked to relatively healthy romantic relationships, preferably ones that end in marriage. Selflessness, then, the antithesis of *having*, is only practiced when one enters into an honest partnership with another, unlike the corrupt, exploitative authority figures Peckinpah's protagonists oppose. Traditional romantic couples, in other words, can survive whereas Peckinpah's world is inhospitable to singles, who are presented as unacceptably transgressive; Bennie fails because he is unable to avoid temptation and is corrupted, making a relationship with Elita impossible.

### **Conclusion:**

Sam Peckinpah's cycle of road movies is somewhat anachronistic, as these films contain themes more appropriate to the Westerns of the 1960s than road movies of the early '70s, and it is remarkable how accurately Will Wright's description, in *Sixguns & Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, of the themes and structures of '60s Westerns applies to those in Peckinpah's road movies. Wright argues that the “transitional theme [found in many Westerns from the '60s] is almost a direct inversion of the classical [Western] plot” (74). In these films, he continues:

The hero is inside society at the start and outside society at the end. He still has his exceptional strength and special status; but the society, which was weak and vulnerable in the classical story, is now firmly established and, because of its size, stronger than the hero or the villains. Rather than being forced into fighting

against the villains for society, the hero is forced to fight against society, which is virtually identified with the villains of the classical story. Finally, the woman whom the hero loves no longer serves inevitably to reconcile him with society; instead, she joins him in his fight and his separation from society. (74-5)

As I have discussed, Peckinpah's road movies pit a male protagonist with a female accomplice against corrupt and powerful representatives of society. This model is most closely followed in *The Getaway*, in which Benyon has considerable influence over the parole board and uses his power to manipulate Doc and Carol, and in *Convoy*, in which the truckers are harassed by police and exploited by a politician; in both cases, the leading men are able to escape with the help of their romantic partners. In *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, however, Peckinpah presents the result of a would-be hero losing his female companion: because Bennie's judgment is clouded by his obsession to *have* rather than *be* – and in this way his values are the same of those celebrated by a capitalist, consumerist society – Elita is killed, and he ultimately fails to escape from society's corrupting influence.

The key difference between the themes of Peckinpah's road movies and those of others of the early '70s is Peckinpah's emphasis on romantic, traditional/conservative ideas about familial love (like those in earlier Westerns). *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Five Easy Pieces*, etc. are, for example, far more interesting in how they depict individualist protagonists (usually a man or men without love interests) who must go it alone, so to speak; further, these films often feature characters who fail, who are unable to overcome the tensions between them and the society they find oppressive. In *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*, for example, the protagonists die, though these deaths are not the result of any moral shortcomings

as is the case with Bennie in *Garcia*, and these failures are provocative in the way they represent frustration and uncertainty with regard to the question of just how one can successfully oppose a society that does not have the average individual's best interests in mind (these films appear to answer that one can't). Peckinpah, however, is not as daring (but he does, in a rebellious fashion that is in its way appropriate for the road movie genre, stay true to his ideals), and his road movies suggest that escape is possible but only if one experiences individuation through a rejection of the capitalistic structure (i.e. they must choose *being* over *having*) with the help of a like-minded romantic companion with whom he can retreat to some pastoral Eden. In some ways, then, Peckinpah's road movies are re-imaginings of The Garden story in Genesis, and they feature the same traditional, conservative moral themes; that is, they warn against temptation and corruption while celebrating romantic unions.

In terms of Peckinpah's technical proficiency, his road movies are hit and miss. The sonic-visual montage that opens *The Getaway* is masterful, for example, and its representation of men, machines, confinement, and movement effectively invokes and critiques Ford and Taylor and their obsession with efficiency and profit, ideas that can easily lead to the dehumanization and exploitation of people. Additionally, *Garcia* features some interesting use of slow-motion. As Prince notes in *Savage Cinema*, Peckinpah was at this time still using the techniques – such as multi-camera filming, montage, and slow-motion – he had learned from studying films like Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*: “For the scene in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* where the professional killers Quill and Sappensly massacre a Mexican family, Peckinpah used five cameras, two of which were running at high speed to produce slow motion” (52). And, when the two thugs in *Garcia* lose control of their car and skid off the road, Peckinpah cleverly

manipulates viewers' emotions by intercutting slow-motion and regular speed shots to produce what Prince calls a "perceptual shock" (65). However, *Convoy* is sloppy on nearly every level: the writing is poor, the acting is uninspired, the use of slow-motion is ineffective, and so on.

Peckinpah's decision to venture into the road movie genre was a curious one. On the one hand, both *The Getaway* and *Convoy* were clearly attempts to capitalize on the success of other films in this vein (1968's *Bullitt*, for example) and a country novelty song; on the other, *Alfredo Garcia* is a "Peckinpah film" if there ever was one, and he claimed it is the most fully realized of all his films. Regardless, when compared to other films in the genre from the same period, Peckinpah's road movies, mostly due to their relatively banal moralizing, do not quite stack up. The road, as Peckinpah presents it, symbolizes the path toward a better future; the road, as Monte Hellman and Dennis Hopper present it, however, symbolizes uncertainty and sometimes horror. The moral rules in Peckinpah's universe are often clear (as are the consequences for morally transgressive behavior); morality in the more daring road films of the period is fluid or even unknowable. Peckinpah's protagonists are heroes, though often reluctant ones (and when they are not, such as in Bennie's case, their deaths are deserved); the leads in *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*, on the other hand, are victims who cannot or will not conform and, in turn, pay the ultimate price. Somewhat poetically, Peckinpah's last detour into the road movie genre would, for all intents and purposes, mark the end of the road for him with regard to being viewed as a competent and respected filmmaker. His inability to continue the thematic and technical innovation he had come to be known for when venturing into a genre that was so hospitable to such inventiveness, as it was being radically reinvented in the late 1960s through the mid-'70s, unfortunately signaled Peckinpah's decline. That said, while Peckinpah clearly sought to cash in

with his road movies, he did not sell out; these films reflect the same, if outdated, themes contained in his other work, and in this way were among the most rebellious road movies of all.

## **Aestheticized Violence in Sam Peckinpah's Final Films: His Influences and Influence and the Unity of Vision and Technique in His Oeuvre**

### **Preface:**

If Sam Peckinpah is remembered for just one thing it is undoubtedly the representation of violence in his many films. Some criticize this violence for being excessive or even gratuitous<sup>9</sup>; the way it is presented or stylized, however, is what continues to impress and inspire many audiences and artists. While it is true that Peckinpah did not exactly invent any of the techniques he used--filmmakers as diverse as Akira Kurosawa and Arthur Penn inspired Peckinpah's brand of aestheticized violence--he was able to achieve remarkable things with regard to the depictions of screen violence, and his influence on contemporary directors like John Woo and, to some extent, Quentin Tarantino is obvious. If nothing else, Peckinpah (and Penn) changed the critical conversation in America and elsewhere about screen violence, in some ways pulling 'violent films' out of the 'gutter' of exploitation cinema and thereby establishing another medium (or even subgenres) in which social and political problems and questions could be more or less seriously examined and critiqued.

In order to more coherently examine Peckinpah's influences (specifically, *how* they influenced his work) and, in turn, the influence he had on others, this chapter is organized into several sections. One section, for example, seeks to establish some understanding of what we

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<sup>9</sup> I've cited critics on this point in previous chapters, but it's worth noting here that charges of gratuitous violence are not necessarily critical or negative; Juan Rodriguez Flores, in "The Elegiac Violence in the films of Sam Peckinpah," for example, writes that Peckinpah's use of violence was both "gratuitous and realistic." In some ways, then, this suggests that our reality outside of film is filled with violence on a scale we might not be comfortable acknowledging. Can we, somewhat ironically, passively accept what is presented to us via the evening news but be offended by "realistic" representations of violence in film and other fictional media?

might mean when we refer to “violence” ; further, this section discusses the relationship between violence and what will be called “screen violence,” i.e. cinematic depictions of aestheticized, stylized violence. Another and closely related section investigates the appeal of screen violence. Specifically, I attempt to answer the following question: if violence represents an existential threat, why might audiences be drawn to representations--and cinematic ones, in particular--of it? I examine here how screen violence affects us as viewers and critics. What does it communicate and how? Why do our responses to screen violence vary so dramatically? After this foundational discussion, the chapter moves to an examination of Peckinpah’s predecessors, mostly notably Akira Kurosawa, focusing on technical innovation (the use of multiple cameras filming at different speeds, the use of asynchronous sound and visuals, etc.) and the representation of violence to build a narrative and, perhaps more importantly, as a critical tool.

The bigger point I make here is that there is no one universally accepted definition of “violence.” What’s more, there are examples of instances in which “real violence” (e.g. football, boxing, and certainly the mixed martial arts) does not alienate viewers, as there are examples of instances in which simulated or somehow inauthentic violence (e.g. professional wrestling) arouses viewers. Indeed, both the NFL and the UFC are incredibly popular. What constitutes violence is a question that is nearly as difficult to answer as the question of why both real and simulated violence appeal to many people.

Generally speaking, though, violence can be defined for our purposes here in two ways: 1) a behavior or action intended to cause physical harm to a person or damage to an object and 2) a behavior or action that in some way inflicts psychological and/or other damage or injury to a person or group via infringement, denial, or manipulation. The first definition is the most

germane with regard to the purposes of this chapter, though, as we are principally concerned with cinematic depictions of simulated physical violence, i.e. when a character is shown to be purposefully harming another. This is what is meant here by the term “screen violence.”

“Aestheticized violence,” in turn, refers to *how* screen violence is depicted, i.e. how the violence is filmed, edited and stylized, otherwise mediated, and ultimately presented to audiences. Through a series of technical choices, a filmmaker depicts violence in a certain way and for specific purposes, though these reasons may vary from a desire to simply make the violence visually appealing or interesting or novel (e.g. the way Quentin Tarantino frequently uses it) to attempts to use the specific representation of violence--as opposed to violence in and of itself--to, via semiotics, comment on or even critique the function of violence and the presence of other issues within society. Aestheticized violence is not limited to cinema, of course; all representations of or even discussions about violence (if one thinks about how violent acts are discussed in the media or news, for example) can be crafted to have an effect beyond the strict communication of facts. Indeed, the way violence is presented to an audience necessarily says something about that violence, implicitly or explicitly.

The question of choice when it comes to the consumption of media and, specifically, screen violence is a fascinating one: why is it appealing and why do some of us seek out and enjoy representations of violence?

## **Introduction:**

Of course, filmmakers evolve throughout their careers; changes do not only happen from generation to generation. As such, one of the primary questions of this chapter is this: in what



ways, especially with regard to his use of aestheticized violence, did--or, perhaps, didn't--Peckinpah change over the course of his storied career? In other words, how did he present violence and was his attitude towards it seemingly consistent? Further, is the violence present in his final films used for a purpose beyond titillation or is it used gratuitously, as some aforementioned critics have charged? Was he willing and able to develop the strategic and purposeful use of screen violence, such as that in *The Wild Bunch* and *Straw Dogs*, or did he come to employ it for its own sake (and, if so, why?) in an effort to exploit its appeal to titillate viewers?

The answer to these questions is complex. While the screen violence in *The Killer Elite*, for example, is banal and arguably boring (due in part to Peckinpah's lack of focus with regard to the major themes that inspired his masterpieces), his form/technique was excellent and effective in *Cross of Iron*. With this film, Peckinpah appears recommitted to exploring questions around the effect on average people of corrupt power, and for him the most important effects are the loss of autonomy and both literal and figurative violence; appropriately, his use of aestheticized violence in this film permits him to communicate this to audiences on several levels. For various reasons, *The Osterman Weekend*, like *The Killer Elite*, is a relatively failure. While Peckinpah returns here, at least somewhat, to the aforementioned themes, screen violence simply is not as necessary to the telling of his story, and in turn its use seems gratuitous and even silly.

While I do not think Peckinpah intended this, his final film can be viewed in a very general way as an appropriate segue to the 'ultra violent' films of the 1980s and beyond in that it, as in the movies that followed, incorporated violence in a more exploitative manner, i.e. the screen violence is not employed as a technique in an effort to critique social violence and corrupt

power (even many of the exploitation films of previous decades used violence in a critical way to comment on contemporary social issues). There are, of course, plenty of exceptions to this; however, *The Osterman Weekend* strikes me as Peckinpah's weakest film, and this is due in no small part to how he used screen violence in it. Clearly, though, his concerns (principally, the violent effects of corrupt power on individual autonomy and processes of individuation) remained constant throughout his career, and he was committed until the end to using aestheticized violence, more or less, to critique the problems he identified.

Screen violence has always been a controversial subject, and there have always been critics who reacted passionately to it and, in many cases, with undue alarm. In his 1967 essay "Movies to Kill People By" (anthologized in *Screening Violence*), for example, Bosley Crowther wrote:

Something is happening in the movies that has me alarmed and disturbed. Moviemakers and moviegoers are agreeing that killing is fun. Not just old-fashioned, outright killing, either, the kind that is quickly and cleanly done by honorable law enforcers or acceptable competitors in crime. This is killing of a gross and bloody nature, often massive and excessive, done by characters whose murderous motivations are morbid, degenerate, and cold. This is killing of the sort that social misfits and sexual perverts are most likely to do. And the eerie thing is that moviegoers are gleefully lapping it up. (51)

If he felt this way about the relatively tame *The Dirty Dozen*, how would Crowther have reacted to *Saw*, *Hostel*, or pretty much any other contemporary horror movie? And, despite how laughable his critique seems now, how different is what he said in the '60s when compared to

what some critics say about movies today? Violence has virtually always been present in cinema, and some people have always found screen violence offensive. Is there such a thing as a difference between acceptable and appropriate screen violence and what some might call unacceptable or inappropriate?

The point is that, although it is incredibly difficult to precisely define, ‘screen violence’ is neither inherently good nor bad; instead, it is a tool, and it can be used in different ways for different purposes. Peckinpah’s legacy when it comes to technique is that he took what Kurosawa and others began and brought a certain ‘evolved’ brand of aestheticized violence to modern American audiences, who in some cases saw this screen violence as excessive, gratuitous, and new even though it was none of those things. And, while I have been critical of *The Osterman Weekend*, for example, that is principally because it does not live up, in terms of substance and execution, to Peckinpah’s earlier work; that film’s violence makes it less effective but this does not mean he was suggesting through its use that, as Crowther would say, “killing is fun.”

Some contemporary critics have drawn a sharp distinction between the artful violence of 1970s cinema and the ‘ultra violent’ exploitative films of the ‘80s and beyond. Stephen Prince, for example, argues that Peckinpah's legacy has been hijacked by postmodern filmmakers who employ his aesthetic techniques for the purposes of vicarious excitement [and, thus, renders them superficial]” (qtd. in Kendrick 29). While I have said similar things, I am also simultaneously aware of the dangers of this type of reactionism; is it a fair criticism or are we being nostalgic or sentimental? Further, if enough exceptions to the rule can be found, has the rule outlived its usefulness? James Kendrick, in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, writes beautifully

about the ways in which Peckinpah forever changed long-standing genre conventions with regard to structure, for example, and I am comfortable granting the benefit of the doubt to modern filmmakers who are making movies in their own ways, challenging conventions (e.g. with regard to how screen violence is used) many of us once held as sacred while repurposing the slow motion and montage techniques, for example, that Peckinpah and others developed.

There is no consensus with regard to the answer to the fundamental question of why screen violence is appealing. Many critics are strongly skeptical of Peckinpah's own claims about the catharsis value of aestheticized violence, but there is some agreement about its function. James Kendrick argues, for example, that the presentation of violence "is a way of talking about other subjects that often get repressed--uncomfortable social and cultural issues such as gender, race, economic disparity, criminality, the perceived dissolution of the public sphere, generational issues, morality, the powerful role of media institutions (3). And, despite the fact that "media scholars and the general public are generally talking about different things" when discussing screen violence (Kendrick 3), J. Hoberman suggests in "A Test for the Individual Viewer" from *Why We Watch* that, generally, "it is also possible that a discussion of the violence [in cinema] is a way to talk about something else" (118). Indeed, the way viewers respond to screen violence is important in terms of reflecting how they see themselves in relation to both the acceptability of mediated violence and the social issues it represents. As Jeffrey Goldstein says in his essay "Why We Watch," viewers of *Bonnie and Clyde* (and the same can be said about virtually any violent film) "defined themselves by their responses to screen excesses. The violence of the film became a subject of conversation and social posturing, the purposes served by our public responses to all forms of entertainment" (216). More importantly,

though, screen violence can provide opportunities for reflection on both philosophical and socio-political issues. Perhaps especially when it is aestheticized in order to avoid unnecessary and unproductive alienation, violent images, as Vivian C. Sobchack argues in “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies” from *Screening Violence*, allow “us to find some brief respite from our fears. The moment of death can be prolonged cinematically (through editing, slow motion, extreme close-ups, etc.) so that we are made to see form and order where none seems to exist in real life” (118). Sobchack continues, “The movement of the human body toward nonbeing is underlined, emphasized, dramatized and we all become Olympic participants of Olympian grace. We can also see ourselves on the fringes of the frame, falling by the wayside, but falling in the movies” (118).

Viewers will always experience and respond differently to screen violence. Despite a filmmaker’s best attempt to convey or critique certain ideas through its employment, (s)he only has so much control. As Prince writes in “Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects” from *Screening Violence*, “Viewer reactions to screen violence are volatile, and filmmakers cannot reliably control these responses, that is, they cannot craft their scenes so as to eliminate the variant reactions” (32). But through careful aestheticization, filmmakers can increase the possibility of positive--or at least non-alienating--responses. Beyond this, though, and despite the challenges inherent in using violence to convey meaning, there is little doubt that violence will always have a place in the cinema beyond mere spectacle. As John Bailey rightly states in “Bang Bang Bang Bang, Ad Nauseum,” “Because we live and work in such a violent society, it is natural that our films reflect and explore this violence. But often we only explore it deep enough to wallow in its muck. This is where the question of a demarcation

arises” (81). He continues by asking what the difference between exploration and exploitation with regard to screen violence really is and, as important, who decides? This is a question I have struggled with throughout this chapter. Within the context of Peckinpah’s oeuvre, though, I have done my best to describe the differences between exploration and exploitation in his work. On the whole, Peckinpah’s brand of aestheticized violence, as we see this to varying degrees up through his final three films, works in service of his themes, namely a celebration of individual autonomy and a critique of corrupt power. Peckinpah believed that exposing audiences to ‘realistic’ aestheticized violence was a way to shake them from a state of complacency and desensitization that was the result of “decades of painless, bloodless movie killings” (Prince 176) and, in turn, get them to oppose the Vietnam War, for example, by recognizing just how brutal and devastating violence is. Or, as John Bailey, puts it: “Experiencing violence and death in our art is a very real way of affirming our life” (83). Peckinpah, writing to a viewer who was critical of the violence in *The Wild Bunch*, put it this way: “I am sorry you did not enjoy *The Wild Bunch*. Perhaps some of its vulgarity and violence will remain with the people who will see it and they will understand better the nature of the continuing plague that infects our country” (qtd. in Prince 178).

### **Why Is Screen Violence Appealing and What Does It Do?:**

As James Kendrick explains in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, each film “uses violence differently--aesthetically, ideologically, and generically--which is precisely why *violence* is such a tricky concept” (2). The violence in *The Passion of the Christ*, Kendrick argues, is qualitatively different, for example, than the violence in a film like *Armageddon*,

which he says is “designed purely to excite and thrill” (2). Screen violence that is obviously fantastic and escapist in nature, however, is not the brand of violence that can truly affect most viewers in a visceral way; it is more remarkable that extreme screen violence that is depicted hyper-realistically has relatively wide appeal. The fact that the “torture porn” or “splatter film” genre--which was popularized in the 1960s by Herschell Gordon Lewis and evolved into something altogether more gruesome with works such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and that reemerged with a vengeance in the 2000s with *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005)--has remained popular says something about us, certainly, but the question of what that continues to confound. (Arguably, this genre’s roots can be traced back to the Edison film company’s 1903 release, *Electrocuting an Elephant*, which captured the real electrocution of Topsy, a three-ton Coney Island elephant, and was released to be viewed via kinetoscope.)

In an attempt to understand which forms of screen violence are and are not, in fact, appealing to viewers and why, Clark McCauley, a social psychologist and author of “When Screen Violence Is Not Attractive” from *Why We Watch*, conducted an experiment of sorts using undergraduate students. In his experiment, McCauley, along with his colleagues Haidt and Rozin, showed viewers three videos: one in which a live monkey was hammered unconscious and had its brains served on plates, one in which steers had their throats cut in a slaughterhouse, and another in which a child had her face pulled away from her skull during a surgery. What is interesting is that the nature of the violence in these videos varied; the violence in the monkey video probably seems unnecessary and ‘gross’ to us whereas animal slaughter (for purposes of food production) and surgery are routine and, at least in the case of surgery, necessary, though we do not often volunteer to witness such processes. Nevertheless, McCauley concludes that

depictions of these kinds of violence “do not have much commercial appeal” (145). Indeed, McCauley notes that “[o]nly about 10 percent of students watched these films all the way to the end, and even these few rated the films as somewhat disturbing and disgusting”; he is further compelled to wonder why, given the popularity of violent media, the violence in his three films is not as popular as Hollywood’s (145).

The answer to his question is relatively simple: “dramatic distance” or “framing violence as fiction” is key “if screen violence is to be attractive” (144). This concept is one I refer to in this chapter and elsewhere as *aestheticized violence*. In other words, it is apparently incredibly important, if a significant number of viewers are to ‘enjoy’ or make meaning of screen violence, for the violence depicted to be stylized (through camera work, editing, music, etc.) in such a way that viewers understand that what they are seeing is not real. Significantly, McCauley more or less rejects the catharsis argument that Peckinpah, among others, makes to justify his use of violence and to explain its appeal; further, he dismisses the notion that the attractiveness of horror films in particular is in their appeal to our curiosity (149-50). In McCauley’s words: “But in any case, catharsis theory does not suggest why the three disgusting films are unappealing. [...] If horror films appeal by eliciting and purging negative emotions, such as fear and disgust, then the three disgust films should likewise appeal” (153). He continues:

The curiosity-fascination theory of horror’s appeal is likewise unhelpful. The content of the three films is certainly anomalous, at least in the sense that few of our subjects had ever seen in everyday life anything like what they saw on-screen. Subjects should have been fascinated to see something so unusual and curious to see the end of these films. All three films were norm breaking in the descriptive



sense of making public on-screen what is usually private, and the monkey epicures, at least, were breaking a moral norm, against eating a live animal.

Despite all this foundation for curiosity and fascination, the disgust films were not generally appealing. (153-4)

Again, McCauley's explanation for why his three "disgust films" failed to appeal to viewers and, in turn, his theory about what kinds of screen violence are attractive come back to aestheticization and narrative, precisely the things his films lacked but what Hollywood does incredibly well. He writes, "Our films had the kind of sound typical of inexpensive documentary productions: no music, no special effects, and dialogue or voice-over without the vibrancy and diction that trained actors produce with the help of a good sound lab. It seemed possible that unappealing sound tracks made our films unappealing" (155). And, as he notes when discussing Cohen, music can make a film feel more real, in the sense that it can help manipulate a viewer's emotions, "but the very presence of the music contradicts reality" (qtd. in McCauley 156). "The same," McCauley reasons, "can be said of film sound effects, which long ago left fidelity behind in favor of surrealism. Gunshots, auto wrecks, and footfalls in the hallway are represented in film sound as ideal types, more vivid than the reality they signal" (156). Regardless of how much viewers claim to be attracted to 'realistic' violence, real violence (on the news or in documentary films) can be disturbing because, in part, it lacks the aesthetic distance that affords viewers a sense of safety or distance, though we do not see massive outrage or protests against the evening news like we do when Tarantino releases a new film. As McCauley concludes, "The answer to the question with which we began may after all be as simple as the difference between fact and

fiction: these three films were disgusting rather than enjoyable because they were loaded with cues for reality and were lacking the frame of dramatic fiction” (161).

While McCauley’s work helps us to understand why a certain type of violence is attractive--or, more precisely, why a certain type is unattractive (though, it remains an open question with regard to where the demarcation line is)--it does not necessary explain why other types of violence are appealing. Clearly, aestheticization can prevent us from being genuinely disturbed (perhaps this explains why viewers can enjoy something like professional wrestling, as we know the violence committed by the participants is not ‘real’), but why do many viewers actively seek out representations of violence? This, of course, is a different question than the one about why some humans were/are attracted to real violence such as ‘blood sports’ like gladiatorial combat or MMA, but screen violence, and dramatic--as opposed to documentary--violence in particular, is what is most relevant here.

McCauley established that aestheticization is necessary if screen violence is to attract and not repulse viewers, but he is not able to satisfactorily answer the question of why screen violence can appeal to viewers. In other words, what makes screen violence appealing, especially if we dismiss the catharsis theory? Surely there is something about aestheticized *violence* in particular that has power. In “Why We Watch,” Jeffrey Goldstein begins his discussion by reminding readers that violent imagery or screen violence “is not a single entity” (212). Paraphrasing Maurice Bloch, Goldstein argues that “it would be a mistake to regard all displays of violence as stemming from the same source or serving the same purposes” (212). Further, he notes that what a society regards as “violent,” particularly with regard to representations of violence in popular media, “changes from time to time and across media” and that “[m]ost

popular entertainments are devoid of violent images” (213). Goldstein, like McCauley, concludes that both aestheticization and context matter a great deal if screen violence is to appeal to, rather than alienate, viewers. When discussing the viewer’s need for a sense of safety, Goldstein argues that “violent imagery must carry cues to its unreality or it will lose its appeal” (221) and writes:

Images of carnage on the nightly news are far more disturbing than exploding bodies in a war film or the worst images from *Mortal Kombat*. Without background music, awareness of the camera, exaggerated special effects, or film editing, images of violence are unattractive to both males and females, according to McCauley’s experiments. In the Scandinavian study cited by Joanne Cantor, preschool children typically showed facial expressions of joy while watching cartoon violence but showed negative emotions while watching realistic physical violence.” (220)

While it is useful to review Goldstein’s ideas, as they corroborate McCauley’s study, he too, at least here, only speaks to the alienating potential of screen violence; he does not offer an explanation for why it appeals to many viewers. Why do people seek out and apparently enjoy screen violence?

In his introduction to *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, Goldstein is a bit more direct when it comes to proposing possible answers to the above question. Specifically, citing a need for a discussion about the reception and appeal of violent entertainment--he says, “[p]oliticians and others who debate violent entertainment focus only on its *production* [and effects] while ignoring its public *reception*” (1)--Goldstein suggests that while the “suspension of disbelief, the eagerness to pretend, may be a requirement for the

enjoyment of violent entertainment,” it “is also a source of pleasure in itself” (3). Noting that fantasy and escapism seem to be inherently enjoyable, he wonders if violence might perhaps “add something further to the attractiveness of stories, legends, [and] rituals” (3). While Goldstein seems tentative here, surely violence adds “something further” in the form of intensifying dramas, cinematic ones and otherwise. While many films feature conflicts that are resolved through nonviolent means, audiences (if box office numbers are any indication) undeniably flock to theaters to see representations of violent conflicts. Some screen violence is obviously gratuitous, however we might define that term, but violence can be and has been used in films to intensify narratives, i.e. to raise the stakes, such as in Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), by exploring and even exploiting matters of life and death. Further, as Goldstein notes, violence can also be used “stylistically to convey countercultural sentiments” (4), which is how Peckinpah used it in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Getaway* (1972), for example. The conclusion of Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969), when Wyatt and Billy are attacked because of the threat they represent to society, is another instance of this function of violence.

And this is perhaps the most compelling explanation of why screen violence is attractive: as Goldstein writes, “[F]or many, it may not be the violence per se but other satisfactions that are its main attractants. For the majority of consumers of violent imagery, the violence is a means to an end, an acceptable device valued more for what it does than for what it is” (213). In other words, screen violence in and of itself is not necessarily what appeals to many viewers, though obviously some are motivated by a desire to see representations of violence regardless of its function; rather, as was suggested earlier by McCauley, the context of the violence within a narrative matters a great deal. Certainly, again, morbid curiosity also motivates some filmgoers,

but, as Goldstein says of the research and analysis included in *Why We Watch*, the appeal of “violent entertainment may have less to do with our ‘violent nature’ and more to do with old-fashioned virtues of morality and justice” (215). Perhaps no film genre reflects this better than the Western, which especially before anti- and revisionist Westerns came along, almost always represented violence as a means to an end and as a necessary ‘evil.’ Indeed, who was performing the violence and how it was performed mattered a great deal, and the implication--if not an outright declaration--was that there is ‘good’ violence and ‘bad’ violence or that it could be used justly and unjustly.

As Goldstein and others demonstrate, how violence is represented and how it functions within a narrative have a tremendous effect on viewers, especially with regard to the appeal or tolerability of this violence. Viewers can stomach or even enjoy screen violence that is a) clearly unreal and stylized (i.e. aestheticized) through music and editing and is exaggerated or distorted, b) helps to create a compelling fantasy, and c) leads to a relatively predictable outcome in which the resolution is just and, in some cases, social order is restored. While some films that subvert these qualities can still be enjoyable and effective, they seem to be so because of factors other than the inclusion of violence, e.g. their themes are socially or politically profound and timely.

Though Goldstein admits that our attraction to screen violence might be “an outcome of the “civilizing process,” i.e. “a way to fill the void left by diminished opportunities to experience the real thing” (217), he concludes that “the best evidence is that the audience is disturbed and disgusted by scenes of violence but continues to watch it anyway” (215). In short, it is quite possible that some are not so much attracted to screen violence as we, generally, are tolerant of it

as a narrative tool; in other words, we recognize that violence is a reality of life and that its presence in society potentially represents both problems and solutions.

Yet another possibility with regard to the appeal of screen violence is the pure spectacle it provides, which in some cases makes the requisite unreality--and the safe distance it creates for viewers--even more clear. In terms of genre, action movies are probably the best example of this. The violence in a film like Simon West's *Con Air* (1997), for example, is so over the top that it is almost ridiculous to even call it violence, as it is clearly not meant to be realistic; partly because of the film's premise and plot, the violence (between characters) and destruction in the movie are obviously fantastic and absurd. In turn, as opposed to being disturbed by the on-screen violence, viewers can focus on and appreciate the spectacle created for them. Similarly, viewers can appreciate just how this spectacle is staged and aestheticized. The word "art" is not often used to describe blockbuster action movies in particular, with their grandiose explosions and often mindless dialogue, but the crafting and presentation of screen violence in these films are often remarkably impressive, especially in the age of advanced CGI. Surely this type of spectacle is attractive to many viewers.

As a brief aside: Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), was critical of what he called the "spectacle" and its power a) to distract people from legitimate political and social concerns and b) to facilitate commodification, but I am not necessarily using his precise definition of the term here. However, as he writes, the "concept of 'the spectacle' interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena" (9). While Debord's theories about the power and effect of the spectacle might seem unconnected to a discussion about the appeal of screen violence, they arguably intersect vis-a-vis his assertion that "a critique that grasps the

spectacle's essential character reveals it to be a visible *negation* of life--a negation that has taken on a *visible form*" (9). Again, Debord's use of "negation" here more closely refers to the dehumanizing effects of commodification, but it is interesting that the spectacle of screen violence includes representations of death, another form of negation. While Debord might suggest we are distracted by screen violence more than it actively appeals to us, though these two concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive, I, as others have, would argue that the act of viewing screen violence might in fact have actual psychological benefits. Reminding ourselves yet again that "screen violence" is a clunky, catch-all term and that films vary wildly in their representations of violence and that filmmakers use these representations for different purposes, watching violent films might allow viewers to safely explore or experience what Freud calls the "death drive" or *todestriebe*. Some violent films, moreover, can facilitate discussion and thought about the relationship between life and death, a topic that is often considered taboo in our society. As Debord writes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7). If the spectacle has the power and potential to inspire negative and destructive relationships between people, could it not also facilitate growth and development, somewhat ironically through the presentation of aestheticized violence?

To return: while it is dangerous to use the one term "screen violence" to discuss various types of violent images that are created for different purposes, the points above about aestheticization generally hold: viewers are usually disturbed by screen violence that is not aestheticized and is without genuine narrative purpose. And, as Stephen Prince writes in "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects," the medium of film "inevitably *aestheticizes* violence. The arousal and expression in cinema of 'negative'

emotions--fear, anxiety, pain--typically occur as part of a pleasure-inducing aesthetic experience” (27). In other words, the use of screen violence is one effective way for filmmakers to create the pleasure many viewers seek; by first arousing those negative emotions, relief and pleasure can be provided via the elimination, through aestheticized violence, of those negative emotions. So, not only are viewers pleased by the “positive” emotions evoked through a film’s narrative, but the screen violence itself, if presented in such a way that it does not excessively disturb, can be attractive for its spectacularity. This theory does not explain the type of violence in a film like *Straw Dogs*, for example, which is genuinely disturbing (and intended to be so), but it is nonetheless useful when trying to understand the use and appeal of screen violence in a general way.

With regard to a film like *Straw Dogs* and its depiction of violence, the word “appeal” is not particularly appropriate; indeed, though Peckinpah certainly uses violence in that film, as I have discussed elsewhere, it is safe to say his goal was not to ‘entertain’ viewers with it. Instead, the purpose of the screen violence in that film was to disturb, and its function was to emphasize the likewise disturbing theme. The violence is necessary in that it allows Peckinpah to comment on issues of barbarism, brutality, and savagery. Indeed, *Straw Dogs* is in many ways a film about violence; specifically, it is arguably about what violence does to us (psychologically and emotionally) and what either rejecting or embracing it says about us as supposedly civilized people. Peckinpah, throughout his filmography, was critical of violence, though many have argued that he glorified it through aestheticization. There are few examples in film of violence that is more aestheticized than that in *Straw Dogs*, yet it is obvious that Peckinpah was saying in this film specifically that violence is psychologically devastating and that, as a civilization, we



have the potential and opportunity to resolve conflicts by other means. What is more, this theme probably would not have been as clear or effective if brutal, aestheticized violence, the sort that affects viewers on both conscious and unconscious levels, had not been used. This film is a great example of one that depicts violence not in order to entertain but to inform or instruct, and that is where its ‘appeal’ lies.

Of course, a filmmaker only has so much control over any given viewer’s reaction to screen violence. McCauley’s work, as explained above, gives us a sense of how many--or even most--people respond to extreme, un-aestheticized violence, but there were outliers in his study, viewers who were not nearly as disturbed as the others were. These people are not necessarily sociopaths, of course. As Martin Scorsese says of the power of aestheticized screen violence:

And you can’t stop people from getting an exhilaration from violence, because that’s human, very much the same way as you get an exhilaration from the violence in *The Wild Bunch*. But the exhilaration of the violence at the end of *The Wild Bunch* and the violence that’s in *Taxi Driver*--because it’s shot a certain way, and I know how it’s shot, because I shot it and I designed it--is also in the creation of that scene in the editing, in the camera moves, in the use of music, and the use of sound effects, and in the movement within the frame of the characters. ... And that’s where the exhilaration comes in. (qtd. in Prince 27 [from “Graphic Violence in the Cinema”])

Scorsese’s choice of the word “exhilaration” here is germane: while the violence itself might be disturbing, the way in which it is “designed,” as he says, can create in viewers a tremendous feeling of suspense or anxiety, which can help a filmmaker convey specific ideas to viewers.

While not all filmmakers who employ violence are commenting on violence as a social phenomenon, some certainly do; Peckinpah, for example, at least claimed to belong to the latter camp. In other words, representations of violence on the screen can at the very least engage viewers on a visceral level, and screen violence can further be used to critique or otherwise comment on 'real world' violence. We must conclude, however, that films which include truly horrifying or relentlessly nauseating depictions of violence represent but a tiny fraction of so-called "violent films," let alone all of cinema as a whole; what is more, even those films that do contain disturbing or highly aestheticized violence more often than not, it seems, have an agenda apart from mere titillation.

One final point must be made regarding our relationship with screen violence: viewers' attitudes and tastes obviously change over time, i.e. what audiences at one time or in one generation largely find to be morally depraved might be considered relatively mundane just several years later. The response to Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is a perfect example of this. As Stephen Prince notes in the introduction ("Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects") to *Screening Violence*, preview audiences in 1969 by and large abhorred the film. As Prince writes, "Sixty percent of those viewers who turned in [review] cards rated the film unfavorably. Only 20 percent rated the film as excellent or outstanding, and these tended to be viewers in the 17-25 age group" (25). Some viewers commented that the film was "a product of our sick society" and described it as "[n]auseating, unending, [and] offensive" (25). One viewer remarked that it was the "kind of picture [mass murderer] Charles Whitman would have enjoyed" (25). While Peckinpah most certainly did not create *The Wild Bunch* solely to disturb viewers, many at the time only saw the film's violence; they seemingly were not able to

look beyond it. Of course, this film is now considered a classic and presently occupies a spot on many esteemed “top 100” lists (e.g. BFI, Sight & Sound, etc.). Temporal distance and changing tastes certainly account, at least partly, for this shift, but the fact that film audiences are undoubtedly more sophisticated now--and I mean this in terms of we have come to understand the language of cinema--must also be considered. Prince, for example, argues that filmmakers “who wish to use graphic violence to offer a counterviolence message--that is, to use violence in a way that undercuts its potential for arousing excitatory responses in viewers--may be working in the wrong medium” (29). He goes on to suggest that the medium of film inherently promises “sensory pleasures,” but Prince seems to think little of viewers’ intelligence and their ability to evolve. While the preview audiences for *The Wild Bunch* had a strong negative reaction, to be sure, there is little chance that an audience would react similarly if that film was released for the first time today. This suggests that on some level viewers, individually and collectively, grow more sophisticated with regard to their ability to interpret, understand, and even appreciate screen violence.

### **Time and Influence:**

Screen violence is not even a relatively new phenomenon, of course. Perhaps one of the earliest and most iconic examples of it can be found in Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which contains plenty of roughhousing and gunplay and concludes with the bandits’ leader, played by Justus Barnes, aiming his pistol at the camera--and, thus, the film’s audience--and firing. Not only was the film wildly popular (notably, the violence it contains is decidedly more tame than what would years later disgust audiences, such as those that previewed

*The Wild Bunch*) but it would also influence filmmakers for generations to come; for example, the final scene from Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), in which Joe Pesci's character fires at the camera/audience, is clearly an homage.

As audiences become more sophisticated, filmmakers evolve--with regard to technique, subject matter, etc.--and push the envelope, so to speak. At times, however, and perhaps Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* are prime examples of this, a filmmaker can, in the view of some, overstep or advance too quickly, thus alienating or offending viewers. Additionally, filmmakers, like artists from all mediums, learn and borrow from their predecessors. As filmmakers began borrowing from Penn and Peckinpah with regard to their brand of aestheticized screen violence, such images eventually became largely accepted and viewed as 'normal' (or at least not nearly as disturbing or offensive as they were once considered). So-called 'splatter films,' for example, like *Saw* and *Hostel*, certainly could not have existed even 50 years ago, for instance, and not just because special effects were not yet advanced enough but because audiences would not have tolerated their realism before being primed. Further, while the 'gore' in Herschell Gordon Lewis' exploitation films of the 1960s and '70s is laughable when viewed through a 21st century lens, it was what was acceptable--to an extent--then. In other words, it was a step in a particular direction as opposed to a giant leap.

The point here is that artistic evolution and innovation are largely due to the influence of preceding artists, and this process is what ultimately affects audiences' tastes and expectations and contributes to their maturation as filmgoers. In the interest of space, and because Peckinpah's maturation vis-a-vis screen violence is the principle concern of this chapter, I would like to just briefly touch on some specific examples of Peckinpah's influences and influence.

Namely, I will argue that Akira Kurosawa is, stylistically, his main influence while Quentin Tarantino is probably the one filmmaker who took Peckinpah's brand of screen violence and made something, while in ways lacking and imperfect, wholly new with it, for better or worse. Obviously, Peckinpah influenced many others--e.g. John Woo, Martin Scorsese, and generally the action films of the 1980s and '90s--as he was influenced by more artists than Kurosawa, but the limited scope here is necessary.

As Paul Schrader remarks in his essay "Slow, Fast, and Reverse Motion" for *Film Comment*, "In the realm of action sequences, slow motion first moves into poetry in [Kurosawa's] *Seven Samurai*" (54). He continues, "From there it's a short sprint to the moment when the toy really becomes a tool, in *Bonnie and Clyde* (67) and *The Wild Bunch* (69)" (54). Schrader also notes:

For *The Wild Bunch*, Sam Peckinpah used six cameras to shoot the scene in which the bridge is blown up. By using multiple cameras, all filming at different speeds, with different lenses and frame sizes, Peckinpah found a way to extend time enormously. Nobody had done it quite that way before. Slow motion is employed wherever it's useful to extend time—for violent action, for sports, for pornography. Maybe that's why the masterful use of slow motion in the massacre at the end of *The Wild Bunch* was referred to by critics as the pornography of violence: there is something pornographic in extending time to revel in death. It takes Warren Oates and Ben Johnson a while to fall after they're shot. Peckinpah's use of slow motion isn't manipulative—it's authentically lyrical and morally complex. (54)

Stephen Prince, in “The Aesthetic of Slow-Motion Violence in the Films of Sam Peckinpah” from *Screening Violence*, concurs: “The most important influence [on Peckinpah] is the work of Akira Kurosawa because it was Kurosawa who first showed filmmakers how to intercut slow-motion and normal-speed footage in scenes of violence” (178).

Of course, Peckinpah did not develop this technique on his own; the influence--specifically in terms of aestheticized death/violence--of a filmmaker like Kurosawa was profound and cannot be understated. As James Kendrick notes in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, samurai films (or “chanbara”) in Japan emphasized “characters whose fundamental trait is an almost supernatural ability to kill, sometimes dozens of opponents at a time” (53). Kurosawa, Kendrick continues, “was one of the primary innovators in using slow-motion to enhance the effect of [this type of ‘extreme’] violent action, particularly in depicting death” (53). The Japanese filmmaker, and particularly in *Seven Samurai*, was a critically important figure in the development of the type of aestheticized violence that would become Peckinpah’s trademark (53). Yet, again, evolution is the key; while Peckinpah’s brand of screen violence is undoubtedly indebted to someone like Kurosawa, the former did not merely reproduce what he had seen earlier. Peckinpah, through the use of even more cameras, additional filming speeds, and intense sound design (see *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* and even the bulldozer scene in *Junior Bonner*, for example, during which Peckinpah used four cameras, two shooting at high speed, to create the slow motion effect), was arguably able to build on what Kurosawa had done. Changing perspectives and employing asynchronous audio, especially in a film like *Straw Dogs* and its infamous rape scene, which I discussed in great detail in a previous chapter, were yet other techniques Peckinpah employed in an effort to make his violence more

effective. Additionally, as Prince observes, Kurosawa also experimented with “temporal non-synchrony of image and sound” which “accentuates the contrast of footage shot at differing camera speeds. The normal-speed sound emphasizes the otherness of the slow-motion image” (182). The influence here can clearly be found in the opening shoot-out from *The Wild Bunch*. Significantly, both Peckinpah and Kurosawa used violence in what I would consider to be an effective or purposeful way, i.e. violence is central to their stories and the worlds their characters inhabit; conversely, someone like Tarantino (and, to a much lesser extent, Woo) has been criticized for incorporating gratuitous violence seemingly for its own sake.

While Woo, as Christopher Sharrett observes in his introduction to *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, who has been labeled as a “master of screen violence,” creates a narrative in *Hard Target* that “may be a summary of the neoconservative, late capitalist environment, with its tale of the poor being literally hunted down by the rich” and whose “moralism and humanism stand at the center of his ironic and critical action films” (17), thus making violence serve an important thematic purpose, Tarantino’s films, particularly the early ones (e.g. *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*), reflect a kind of nihilism and employ screen violence as a form of amusement.<sup>10</sup> Though Tarantino’s characters do inhabit violent worlds, like Peckinpah’s protagonists in *The Wild Bunch* and *Straw Dogs*, he seems to choose these characters/worlds in order to exploit screen violence as opposed to commenting on it. In *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, James Kendrick, citing *Variety* executive editor Steven

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Williams, in “Woo’s Most Dangerous Game: *Hard Target* and Neoconservative Violence” from *Mythologies of Violence*, seems to agree that Woo is a more respectable descendent, writing, “Woo’s violent representations resemble more a modern dance, a ‘balletic’ recital, than the type of cynical stylistic approaches common to most examples of American action cinema” (400). He continues, “Though indebted to Western and Hong Kong cinematic traditions, Woo’s references are far removed from the superficial borrowing of recent directors like Quentin Tarantino” (400).

Gaydos, notes that Tarantino's films are “comedic and self-referential” and his “stuff isn't really about anything.” He contrasts these works with those of Peckinpah and even Samuel Fuller, whose films were “very political” and “quite profound” (qtd. in Bygrave 21). It is safe to say that many critics feel Tarantino’s brand of violence is relatively unpurposeful, e.g. Bennie driving around with Garcia's decapitated head in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* is not played for laughs, as it would be in a Tarantino film; instead, it is evidence of a psychotic break and is the result of this character’s fundamental misunderstanding of the effects of violence<sup>11</sup>. A similar charge could be made against Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* despite what Stone says about his goal with that film. In other words, while someone like Tarantino is clearly inspired by Peckinpah and, of course, the grindhouse films of the ‘70s, it is perhaps most clear when looking at his films that aestheticized violence ceases to serve a message or theme, as it did for Kurosawa and Peckinpah, and instead becomes a film’s reason for being.

### **Screen Violence and Peckinpah’s Final Films:**

The sad truth is that Sam Peckinpah’s final films largely lack the creativity, inventiveness, and courage of his earlier ones; not only is the subject matter, except for *Cross of Iron* (1977), more banal, but after 1974’s *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* Peckinpah either decided to mostly abandon the innovative techniques he had earlier employed or was more aggressively controlled by the studios and executives that oversaw his work. In this last section, I would like to examine these final films (except for *Convoy*, which I mention in a previous chapter) vis-a-vis Peckinpah’s use of aestheticized violence. The conclusion, unfortunately, must

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<sup>11</sup> As Owen Gleiberman charges in his review of *Django Unchained*, for example, that film is to some “a low-down orgy of flamboyant cruelty and violence,” and Gleiberman asks, earnestly, if the film is “attacking the cruelty or reveling in it.”



be that instead of reflecting the filmmaker's full realization of his abilities, they are for the most part unremarkable action films that by and large adhere to generic conventions without taking risks with regard to theme, aestheticization (especially when it comes to the use or presentation of violence), or general execution.

***Cross of Iron* (1977):**

While not quite a masterpiece, 1977's underrated *Cross of Iron* reflects Peckinpah's core concerns and demonstrates his technical competency through and through. And, unlike *The Killer Elite*, which (perhaps along with *Convoy*) is most out of place in his oeuvre, it continues in a meaningful way the psychological explorations started most clearly in *The Wild Bunch*, specifically a man's attempt to find camaraderie and meaning in an absurd circumstance that is controlled by rich and powerful forces. Even more to the point of this chapter: *Cross of Iron* exhibits sophisticated editing techniques, set and staging decisions, and sound design that all help Peckinpah to facilitate this exploration.

In short, *Cross of Iron* is about Sergeant Steiner (James Coburn), a German/Nazi platoon leader, who disdains Hitler, the Nazis, and nationalism but who fights in order to protect the men under his command. As one character, apparently echoing Steiner's convictions, says: these soldiers are not fighting for ideals or for their nation/party but for their lives. Even after suffering a concussion and being told he can leave the war and return home, Steiner elects to rejoin his platoon, apparently because a) he does not know what else he would do with himself and b) he does not trust other leaders to keep his men safe. These are themes, of course, that Peckinpah began playing with nearly a decade earlier. And like some of Peckinpah's earlier characters,

Steiner, as Cordell Strug puts it, is “an exploration of how to live in this world: he has the skill that binds him to it, the disgust and hatred that sever him from it” (144).

In addition to exploring Steiner’s need for meaning and purpose in an inherently violent and absurd context, Peckinpah also (and again) explores the tensions between members of different classes. Early in the film, Captain Stransky, a French aristocrat, joins Steiner’s outfit and makes it clear that he elected to come to the Russian front solely to earn the Iron Cross. His declaration strikes those (poor and unprivileged) men who must be there as patently stupid. To Stransky, the war is like a vacation: he can come and go as he pleases, and thus he is relatively safe. After abusing his power, making false claims regarding his right to an Iron Cross (he suggests he led a counterstrike when in reality he was not even on the battlefield), failing to coerce Steiner into backing up his story, and ordering troops to murder some of Steiner’s men, Stransky is led by Steiner to what we can only assume is his death. Earlier in the film, Steiner comments that the rich always survive, so it is significant that Steiner works to ensure that Stransky will not, as Steiner presumably sees him and his class, i.e. those with political and economic power, as responsible for the war and the soldiers’ lot (at one point, Steiner declares that he hates his military uniform and everything it represents). As different but insignificant as *The Killer Elite* is in the context of Peckinpah’s other films, Steiner’s view here is similar to what Mac says and represents in that film.

With regard to the use and presentation of aestheticized screen violence in this film, Peckinpah’s techniques are undoubtedly more sophisticated than they were in *The Killer Elite*, which features some slow motion but, even then, the resulting effect is ultimately lackluster. In *Cross of Iron*, on the other hand, timely inserted slow motion, rapid cuts, montage, squibs and

fake blood, copious amounts of dust, cacophonous explosions, soldiers' cries, et cetera all serve to establish the chaos and brutality of war, and viewers in turn resent Stransky and his class for subjecting people like Steiner and his men, with whom we are clearly meant to identify, to this reality. Here the technique and style serves Peckinpah's themes; the violence is neither pedestrian (as it is in *The Killer Elite*) nor glamorous, and the resulting spectacle motivates viewers to question the necessity of the type of real violence being represented on screen.

The important point here is that with regard to McCauley's study, Peckinpah's screen violence in *Cross of Iron* is aestheticized enough to be clearly representational, even when it is 'disturbing' or makes viewers uncomfortable; its purpose is to inspire reflection, not revulsion. In other words, the use of slow motion and blood that is obviously fake (and Peckinpah's decision to avoid the use of gore), for example, allows viewers to recognize that the violence is crafted. By contrast, the violence in a film like *The Killer Elite* is meant to be, for lack of a better word, entertaining; it is stylized in the way that martial arts films of the era presented violence: it is meant to thrill viewers as opposed to engaging them intellectually. As Prince writes in *Screening Violence*, "Changing camera positions, controlled lighting, montage editing, music, and special effects create significant aesthetic pleasure and emotional distance for viewers, who can use these cues as a means of insulating themselves from the depicted violence" (28), and there is much more of this type of aestheticization in *Cross of Iron* than in *The Killer Elite*, which might at the very least suggest Peckinpah was more personally invested in *Cross* and its themes, even though *Elite* does still deal with camaraderie and isolation. Regardless, the bigger point is that this film does not exist merely as a vehicle for violence, as some films arguably do. As Prince notes, "In the culture of ultraviolence that now engulfs the medium, moviemakers

operate in a kind of postmodern bubble, treating violence as an image and not as a social process” (33). For Peckinpah, though, screen violence was a tool that was still sharp during the crafting of *Cross of Iron*; as Gerard Camy, in “Dawn and Dusk” from *Peckinpah Today*, writes about the film, here Peckinpah “explores the aspects of violence in its complete social dimension by diving into the inferno of World War II” and while “he denounces the individual competition that is constitutive of capitalism, he keeps entire faith in man” (164). To Peckinpah, for the most part, representing violence as “a social process” was critically important; treating it as *just* an image or spectacle serves no larger purpose.

### ***THE OSTERMAN WEEKEND (1983):***

As Peckinpah’s final film, *The Osterman Weekend* is fitting: not only does it continue with some of the themes that occupied most of his earlier films (e.g. camaraderie, loyalty, corruption, power, individuation, etc.), but it also features some of the same shooting and editing techniques, especially with regard to aestheticized violence, that he had employed and developed throughout his career. (Somewhat appropriately, Peckinpah also battled with the film’s producers--as he had during the production of several other films--who significantly re-edited his cut of the movie.) This, however, is a relatively odd film to look at as his final achievement as it, similar to *The Killer Elite*, is more of a thriller than anything else; it is certainly far removed from Peckinpah’s Westerns both in style (genre) and substance. Not only is the film’s plot rather convoluted, but its use of screen violence is not particularly effective and demonstrates that there is not a clear line of evolution vis-a-vis technique throughout Peckinpah’s oeuvre. In other

words, his swan song is hardly a crowning achievement and is definitely not representative of a fully realized vision.

*The Osterman Weekend's* plot centers around John Tanner (Rutger Hauer), the host of a talk show called *Face to Face* on which the politically powerful are routinely taken to task, who is convinced by CIA director Danforth (Burt Lancaster) and agent Laurence Fassett (John Hurt) to get his college friends (played by Dennis Hopper, Craig T. Nelson, and Chris Sarandon), who Fassett alleges are part of KGB-allied spy group called Omega, to turn on one another. As Tanner gathers his friends at his house for a weekend reunion, it is revealed that Fassett is manipulating him in an effort to get revenge on Danforth, who had Fassett's wife murdered. Eventually, Tanner, through some manipulation of his own, is able to rescue his wife, child, and dog from Fassett, who had kidnapped them. Though much of the film's logic is questionable, the principal concern here is Peckinpah's technique and how it does or does not aid in his attempt to convey certain themes.

While *The Osterman Weekend* is probably most appropriately categorized as a thriller, it does contain some action, i.e. screen violence, particularly after Fassett's ruse becomes apparent to Tanner. Tanner's wife shoots an agent with a bow and arrow, for example, and there is a fair amount of gunplay and even a ridiculous RV explosion. Unfortunately, none of this action is particularly well aestheticized--aside from Peckinpah's characteristic use of slow motion and some sound that is manipulated--and is not used in any meaningful way to comment on the nature of violence in society (as we saw in *Cross of Iron*, for example), though both Danforth and Fassett, who represent power or the elite, are quick to resort to assassination to achieve their personal goals and apparently see ordinary citizens as pawns in their game, as Fassett is watching

a baseball game on television as he is orchestrating the dissolution of the Osterman group; the violence in *The Osterman Weekend*, however, is somehow more personal (it plays like a home invasion movie) and not as clearly indicative of systemic problems as it could be, and in this way its employment is less sophisticated and effective than we see in other Peckinpah films, namely *The Wild Bunch*, *Straw Dogs*, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, and *Cross of Iron*.

If anything, *The Osterman Weekend* is ostensibly about the relationship between power and surveillance, and as a result even its relatively small amount of violence can be viewed as gratuitous since it is simply not necessary to employ in service of this theme. Even Gerard Camy, who praises the film in “Dawn and Dusk” from *Peckinpah Today*, admits that “Peckinpah was more interested in the relationships between the characters [in this film] than in the plot itself” (180). And because the plot clearly has issues, it is difficult to say anything more definitive regarding the film’s theme or argument other than that Peckinpah seems to suggest here that “society at large is nothing but a gigantic place of corruption and disorder, and his film is the mirror of cold, barbaric behavior” (Camy 179). Though, again, it is not necessary to use screen violence to communicate this, and its presence is at least part of the reason why some viewers see the film as absurd and incoherent. What’s more, the aestheticization of the screen violence that is used only serves to unnecessarily disorient viewers, though it is not close to reaching the level of severity of the “disgust films” from McCauley’s study; contrast this with the disorienting violence in *Cross of Iron* that serves a purpose with regard to that film’s theme, and it is not difficult to understand why *The Osterman Weekend* was panned by most critics upon its release and has largely been forgotten by mainstream audiences.

## Conclusion

While Peckinpah might never shake his reputation as “Bloody Sam,” one of my goals with this project was to better understand how he used screen violence and, ultimately, to argue that this violence was often carefully and purposefully crafted in service of his thematic concerns. In other words, while Peckinpah could be guilty of occasionally exploiting violence, more often than not this violence was employed to illustrate and argue against the savagery he saw as inherent in an ostensibly civilized society. Power, money, and corruption function to oppress Peckinpah’s protagonists, and he represented their only path to freedom--and, with it, individuation--as one of rebellion against and the total rejection of the economic systems that entrap them. For Peckinpah, the only way to escape, the only way to live a moral, virtuous life, is to defeat those who aim to hold you down and to take (through necessarily violent means) and use their capital to essentially buy your freedom. What’s more, Peckinpah argued that one can never be truly free within an established society; instead, his protagonists must create a new Eden outside of society where they are unburdened by regulations, control, manipulation, and so on.

Cable Hogue, for example, created a utopia in the middle of the desert, where he thrives until he is struck down and killed by an automobile, a symbol of the very society and civilization he sought to escape. Further, Hogue finds himself unjustly punished by a wrathful, petty god--another representative of power in Peckinpah’s films who acts selfishly and violently. God, of course, is out of Hogue’s physical reach; Hogue does not have the ability to rebel against this power in the way other Peckinpah characters do: they can fight and then flee. For Hogue, there is no escape.

Amy and David in *Straw Dogs*, on the other hand, must fight their antagonists, a mob of violent and depraved villagers who rape Amy and attempt to kill David. For this couple, violence is a necessary evil; the villagers are predators who will not listen to reason. And while the violence is necessary, Peckinpah shows it to be both physically and psychologically destructive: David fights and, in a way, wins, but he admits at the end of the film to being lost, as his violent rebellion has fundamentally shaken his own ideas about himself and what he believes in and stands for. Even in victory David loses, and the villagers are responsible for this corruption; his freedom is impossible within their society, and the only way for him to rediscover or reestablish his sense of self is to escape, though to where remains an open question. Regardless, what Peckinpah suggested in this film was that violence is ultimately dehumanizing (we see this in how he films Amy's rape, for example, and in the aforementioned aftermath of the siege), a tool used by the powerful to control others, to maintain the desired form of order and obedience. But, again, Peckinpah's uncomfortable truth was that the only way to overcome violence is through violence. Like we see in many Westerns, though, a protagonist can remain virtuous even if (s)he engages in violence as long as that violence is necessary and its use measured.

Peckinpah's road movies, particularly *The Getaway* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, continued to explore this theme. But unlike other existential road movies being made at the time (*Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*, for example), Peckinpah kept insisting that his libertarian brand of freedom was possible. Doc and Carol rebel against and take from the powerful and corrupt figures around them so that they can essentially purchase their freedom in the form of an escape to Mexico, a country that Peckinpah often depicted as a contemporary Eden. These two characters, while presented as imperfect, nonetheless represent Peckinpah's



belief in the power and value of family, and their love for one another is what helps them survive. On the contrary, Bennie's depraved actions in *Garcia* are what ensure his failure; the fact that he comes to embrace and embody the amoral, corrupt behavior to which he was initially opposed is what, in Peckinpah's world, makes him unworthy of success and independence. Again, this is in stark contrast to the deaths of many protagonists from other road movies of the time who are cruelly and unjustly stamped out by the larger society; these characters cannot survive, in other words, and there is no possibility of escape for them. Peckinpah romantically saw escape and liberation as possible, but only if one behaves morally.

The final chapter of this project took a closer look at the evolution, uses, and effects of aestheticized screen violence. Specifically, the "traditional" morality of earlier Westerns was a clear influence on Peckinpah; he often presented violent battles between good and evil, though he also explored the ambiguity and complexity of the anti-Western. The relationship between violence and morality, then, was his principle obsession, and he attempted to articulate his ideas about this relationship through the careful and sometimes artful manipulation of images and sounds. From a technical perspective, Peckinpah was arguably most directly influenced by Akira Kurosawa, who mastered the art of multi-camera filming, asynchronous sonic and visual editing, and the general aestheticization of screen violence.

Certainly, Peckinpah's body of work, like most artists who have long enough careers, is uneven. Some of his films, e.g. *The Killer Elite*, are banal in nearly every way imaginable. Whether this fluctuation in quality can be attributed to his drug abuse, infamously troubled relationship with producers and studio executives, failed artistic attempts, or some combination of these and other factors, there is also no denying that he left behind a legacy that continues to

interest cinephiles and inspire filmmakers. Beyond his technical achievements, his thematic concerns remain relevant to this day. Neoliberal economic policies, corrupt lawmakers and business executives, and state-sanctioned violence (whether we think of the police or the military) continue to alienate and control ordinary people in explicit and insidious ways. But how to respond? This was the question Peckinpah attempted to answer over and over again in his work. Some of his ideas were naive and some were flatly unrealistic, but there is a love for humanity at the heart of most of his work, a love for man and the ideals of freedom and justice that, when we look beyond the blood and violence (or, more accurately, see them for what they are), can strike viewers as profoundly humane and empathetic. After all, as good of a filmmaker as Peckinpah could be, he was probably an even better poet.

This project owes a debt of gratitude to both the Peckinpah scholars (usually supporters) and critics who have carefully studied and passionately debated his work for nearly 50 years now. I lost track of how many times throughout my research for this project that my thinking about the director shifted and changed, and I am grateful for the opportunity these writers provided me to grow as a student of film. Similarly, I am grateful to thinkers like Erich Fromm and Carl Jung, whose works allowed me to see Peckinpah's films in ways I otherwise would not have. Their fiercely humanistic ideas have influenced not only how I think about the movies I discussed in this project but have also forever changed the way I think about the relationship between power or authority and our processes of individuation. While, like Peckinpah, I might not have the answer with regard to how one can become truly free in the context of a larger society, compassion for one another is something we can practice on a daily basis and it need not necessarily come at the expense of our individual freedom; to the contrary, practicing

compassion for others can, in many ways, make us more free. It might strike some as ironic that a sentiment like this comes at the end of a study of “Bloody Sam,” but after researching his films and the scholarship that surrounds them, it’s an idea I think he believed and one we’d all be wise to consider.

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## Curriculum Vitae

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### Education

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### Teaching Experience:

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2007-2013  
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Carroll University, 2013-2016  
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